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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

PARTICIPATION DECISIONS OF ADULT LITERACY LEARNERS

BY

JEAN RESTON

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFULMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTERS OF EDUCATION IN ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF ADULT, CAREER AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL/1990

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ABSTRACT

In order to better understand the motivation for participation of adult basic learners, this research explored the variables that affect the participation decisions of learners in adult basic education programs. Twenty subjects, functioning with literacy skills of grade six or lower, who had discontinued their participation in low level reading and writing courses were interviewed. Discussion topics included personal history, mechanisms formerly used to cope with reading and writing tasks, factors leading to decisions to participate and later to withdraw from learning programs, and recommendations from learners for improvement of programs to facilitate persistence.

The two categories of responses that emerged from the interview data focused on personal and institutional variables. Personal variables included the issues of dependency, encouragement to continue, basic needs, communication breakdown, and attitudinal changes towards written language. Institutional variables included discussions of funding, curriculum and program requirements, and facilities and equipment improvements.

Although not necessarily mentioned as a reason for participation in basic education classes, many of the subjects found they were less dependent on others after having attended the courses. This aided the development of self-confidence and helped dispel self-doubt about the ability to learn experienced by most subjects. These doubts were sometimes reinforced by poor communication and/or misinterpretation of information concerning learner program planning or advancement, resulting in resentment towards programs. Unmet basic needs further interfered with the learning process and participant's ability to persist. In terms of program variables, lack of relevant curriculum and materials and substandard accommodation for programs were important institutional barriers to persistence. Significantly, despite the difficulties in persisting in the learning environment faced by these adults, all but two of the subjects noted a greater confidence in dealing with reading and writing tasks.

The most significant implication for assisting basic education participants in persisting in reading and writing programs involved the need to help them recognize themselves as learners by encouraging successful learning experiences. As this study focused on non-persisters, an investigation of a broader spectrum of learners is required to attain a more complete understanding of the participations decisions of basic education learners.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Illiteracy among adult populations in North America is a significant problem facing educators. The actual number of illiterate adults is open to debate because it varies according to the criteria used to define the term literate. What is comfortably literate in one setting, could fall dismally short in another. However, for the purposes of statistics and identification of this sub-group in our society, the generally accepted minimum level for functional literacy is grade 9, and for basic literacy, grade 5 (Thomas, 1983.) Using these levels to define literacy requirements, Canada has over four million adult functional illiterates and at least 850,000 adults who do not meet the basic literacy criterion (Thomas, 1983.)

Literacy is not simply the ability to read and write to a predetermined level. Rather, it is a social function which allows those possessing the skills to fully participate in the social, cultural and political life of the society. The term literacy does not have a universal meaning.

Amongst the educated in North America, high levels of reading and writing skills are considered crucial for full participation in society. The greater the skill level, the

greater the likelihood of securing employment at the higher end of the socioeconomic continuum, and the lesser the likelihood of being victimized by the system. Individuals without literacy skills are not social misfits. Many have other skills and abilities which they can substitute or exchange for reading and writing. They build social structures around their strengths, and although their lifestyles may not be equivalent to those of people with more literacy skills, they may lead very productive lives.

For people with lower literacy skills, the need to improve their level often arises when something happens to disturb the social structures within which they live. It can be as traumatic as a broken marriage or a death, the loss of a long existing job, or simply children starting school (the parent wants to be able to help them with their studies.) A disruption or readjustment of circumstances forces consideration of literacy needs, which may lead to the decision to participate in literacy programming.

In the last 15 to 20 years, adult basic education and literacy training programs have been undertaken in a variety of formats and settings in an attempt to eliminate illiteracy. Unfortunately, it has been the general case that these programs have failed to meet their objectives. There have been difficulties in recruiting the targeted population, and once enrolled, the rates of non-completion (dropping-out) have been unsatisfactorily high - up to 50 percent in some programs (Amoroso, 1984.)

Many factors have contributed to the high attrition rates: poorly designed programs, unsympathetic instructors, threatening surroundings, poor self-image, unrealistic expectations of students, and personal constraints. The factors relating to the institutions and teaching methods have been studied at some length, and programs have been changed to reflect new understanding of adult learning processes. However, the more deeply rooted personal reasons for non-completion have yet to be given much consideration.

Due to this lack, this study was made to examine, in depth, the personal and social variables which affect adults' decisions to participate and to discontinue participation in literacy programs.

Statement of the Problem

In most programs, when students decide to withdraw, they are asked the reasons for their decision. The reasons vary but they often involve finances (individuals leave for a job or to find work.) Administrators and teachers involved in literacy education realize that the learners' need to support themselves, and often families, as well, places a heavy strain on them. This is often the learner's stated reason for discontinuing participation in a program. No one in the administration of programs would think to question such an obvious and realistic reason, but it could be that students use this socially acceptable excuse to

'quit', rather than stating that they are displeased with the delivery of the program, or that they are having personal problems. This study proposed to discover the reasons why some of the program leavers decided to leave. More specifically, it was designed to determine if they had problems with the program content or delivery, or had difficulties in their private lives that interfered with their learning progress. The following questions provided the basis for this investigation.

1. What personal and social influences are perceived, by low-literacy or illiterate adults, to be important factors in their decision to participate in a literacy program?
2. What personal and social influences are perceived, by low-literacy adults or illiterate adults, to be important factors in their decision to separate from a literacy program?

These two questions form the framework for the specific questions which were presented to the participants and define limits for probing for additional elaborations and clarification.

Significance of the Problem

Why would the type of information pursued in this study be of significance to educators? Like all educational programs, adult literacy education is expensive, and

although the amount of funding for these programs has not been substantial in comparison to other levels of education, there is still a need to demonstrate some cost-benefit relationships between the expenditure of funds and educational betterment of the client population (those without high reading and writing ability). High attrition rates are often viewed as evidence of a lack of cost efficiency in education programs and this can translate into a reduction or loss of funding for programs. Many studies have explored literacy students' perceptions of the teaching methodologies in terms of their ability to meet the needs of the learners, but little information is available on the networks and systems in the students' worlds outside the classroom, which help or hinder individuals in taking advantage of learning opportunities. A logical presumption is that what aids a learner in making a decision that is as monumental as beginning a literacy program is in some way related to the reason the person later leaves the program. In order to improve the literacy situation for those without basic skills, educators need to be aware of other services required by literacy learners to facilitate their persistence. It is important to keep the learners participating, since there is then a greater likelihood of real changes in their life circumstances and therefore justification for the expense of providing such programming. This study may provide some new directions for expanding support services for these learners.

Assumptions

It was assumed that in the course of discussion, the study participants would provide information on factors in the social environment, other than financial, that interfered with the progress of the individual who had taken the major step of attempting to learn to read and write. It was also assumed that the research methodology used was most appropriate to obtaining the desired information and that the subjects would responded honestly and not fabricate details (say what they thought the researcher wanted to hear.)

Limitations

The naturalistic inquiry in research is, by definition, limited to time and place, and therefore, the results of the study were limited to the group from which the sample was drawn. Generalizations based on the findings, regarding the population of low-literate adults, were made with this precaution in mind.

Delimitations

The subjects for this study were delimited to individuals who had discontinued programs at institutions

in northern central Alberta area. Nearly all subjects were living in an urban setting, although some individuals had grown-up in rural areas. A further delimitation was the use of only individuals in the lowest literacy levels (0-6 program). It was assumed that individuals at the lowest levels of literacy functioning had to cope with different reading and writing problems than those having higher levels of reading and writing skills.

CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The pursuit of universal literacy is the foundation upon which compulsory education in western industrial countries has been based since its inception in the last century. From a historical perspective, the need for literacy "developed in response to conditions encouraging trade and commerce, craft and industrial production, urbanization and administration, and the spread of Protestantism in the Western world"(Thomas, 1983). The belief was that by providing education for children, the population would eventually become totally literate and adults without reading and writing abilities would cease to be a problem. Providing educational opportunities for adults needing or wanting to learn to read and write was low priority, if addressed at all. Today, after over 100 years of compulsory juvenile education, educators, concerned individuals and government agencies continue to lament the deplorably high levels of illiteracy in our society.

The solution proposed by adult educators and the educational institutions has been to provide Adult Basic Education (ABE) for those in our society with low levels of literacy. Since the 1960's the availability of such programs has increased, but these programs only attract a

small portion of those requiring such education, and retention rates in programs is dismally low. Much of the literature on ABE as been focussed on two themes: participation and persistence. To understand the context of this study, these two themes are explored in this chapter.

Context of Need for Adult Basic Education

Definition of Literacy

Illiteracy, as French (1987) points out, is "(t)he problem that concerns society"(p. 5), but Fingeret (1984) contends that illiteracy is the lack of literacy, and therefore, can only be defined in terms of literacy. The problem is finding an adequate definition of this term.

In an attempt to provide a universally useful definition, UNESCO issued the general statement that a minimally literate person is one who is able to write a letter to family or friends and to read the reply (UNESCO, 1957). Minimal literacy, once deemed sufficient for North Americans, is no longer acceptable in a post-industrial society. The arguments now focus on what is considered sufficient.

Dimensions of literacy. In spite of literacy's apparent relationship to education, it is primarily a social achievement (Scribner, 1984; Hunter and Harmon, 1979; Johnson, 1985.) As Scribner (1984) points out, "individuals in societies without writing systems do not become

literate"(p. 7). When considered in relation to social development, it is important to assess the significance of literacy to the individual. Thomas (1983) sees it as "a means to an end, not an end in itself... conditioned by the context in which it is found" (p. 11). Providing an adequate definition of literacy, therefore, becomes extremely difficult as a result of the changing nature of literacy requirements within an individual's cultural context.

The UNESCO definition noted above becomes unusable as the need for reading and writing skills in industrial societies becomes increasingly complex, and it is this complexity that makes an updated definition almost impossible. Fingeret (1984) contends that "(l)iteracy is a shifting, abstract term, impossible to define in isolation from a specific time, place, and culture; literacy, therefore, is described as historically and culturally relative"(p. 9). Any definition, therefore, is determined by cultural needs and societal expectations concerning reading and writing as they evolve and change with the society (Harmon, 1984; Goodman, 1985).

It is apparent from the literature that there is considerable disagreement on what exactly is the place of literacy in our social context. Scribner attempts to provide a contextual framework for literacy through three metaphors: literacy as adaptation, literacy as power, and literacy as a state of grace.

Literacy as adaptation is an attempt to "capture concepts of literacy that emphasize its survival or pragmatic value" (Scribner, p. 9). This metaphor refers to the functionality of literacy in daily lives as we require reading and writing to meet our basic needs for survival. This is often the basis for development of ABE programs because of the connotations for economic well-being, the main concern of government agencies.

Literacy as power "emphasizes the relationship between literacy and group or community advancement" (Scribner, p. 11). In this metaphor, literacy is seen as an agent through which individuals can join together to alter society. This theme is the basis of the work of Freire (1970), which has influenced much of the international thinking on adult literacy. In an article on the ethics of adult literacy education, Kazamek (1984) addresses this notion of literacy for the betterment of the society with reference to educational philosopher John Dewey's concept of social intelligence. If lacking the necessary literacy skill, Kazemek suggests that the individual is deprived of participating in social development through the collective process of social intelligence.

The third metaphor, literacy as a state of grace, reflects the almost mystical power associated with the attainment of literacy, transending the lower levels of needs in Maslow's hierachy, such as providing food and shelter, to self-actualization. "(T)he literate individual's

life derives its meaning and significance from intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual participation in the accumulated creations and knowledge of humankind, made available through the written word" (Scribner, 1984, p. 14). In ascribing this metaphysical aura to literacy, Goodman (1985) warns that there is a danger of literates becoming elitist "members of a semisecret custodial society whose role is the preservation and selective dissemination of the great thoughts and linguistic products of the past" (p. 388-389). Scribner also acknowledges some difficulty with this metaphor because it overlooks "the multiple and diverse oral cultures" (p. 14) found throughout the United States.

Functional literacy. The early notion that an individual could be considered literate with minimal skills has been replaced since World War II. Harmon (1984) points out that a minimal level is not the desired level. Reading and writing skills are contextually specific and "often refer to an individual's more generalized competence in the social world" (Fingeret, 1984, p. 9). In an attempt to take into account the cultural and social context of literacy activities, Harmon and Hunter (1979), in their study of illiteracy in the United States, offer the following definition for functional literacy:

> "the possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders, and members of social, religious or other associations of their choosing. This includes the ability to obtain information they

> want and to use that information for their own and others' well-being; the ability to write adequately to satisfy the requirements they set for themselves as being important for their own lives; the ability to deal positively with demands made on them by society; and the ability to solve the problems they face in their daily lives." (p. 7-8)

It is obvious from this definition that different groups will arrive at different specific levels of functionality, depending on their perceptions of social conditions. Specific levels, rather than concepts, are what those with the power and authority to provide ABE want to consider. While sociologists and anthropologists attempt to define the cultural context, educators attempt to delineate meaningful achievement levels.

Chall (1984) divides literacy attainment into three main categories: basic literacy (equivalent to a grade 4 level), functional literacy (equivalent to a grade 8 level), and high technical literacy (equivalent to a grade 12 or higher level). In recent years this last group has increased in importance and members have become what Chall refers to as the "new illiterates" - individuals often employed as skilled workers in heavy industry (eg., the steel industry), who have recently seen their jobs disappear. Although employment analysts have predicted many of these people will be absorbed into the growing electronics industry, they require retraining to make the transition. The literacy level for retraining, however, is higher than that required for previous employment, which

excludes many of the displaced workers. Chall suggests that the number of individuals in the new illiterate category may be as high as 51 million in the United States.

Technically, all levels of literacy represent some form of functionality; the individual's needs for reading and writing are what determine the required level of functional literacy. However, researchers investigating reading levels of printed materials in our society have determined that over the years, particularly since World War II, the reading level required to access information has continually increased. Harmon (1984) attributes this phenomenon to two developments:

> "First it appears that the level at which materials are being written is gradually increasing. Why this is or whether or not it is necessary are different issues. Second, the increased demand for a relatively high benchmark of functional literacy is indicative of the extent to which reading and writing abilities have become a fundamental component of definitions of basic skills for living; an indication of the rapid evolution of modernity and urbanism, and of their ongoing dynamism." (p.4)

Chall (1984) concurs with this position, citing the example of two class action suits brought against the United States government concerning the readability of contracts for federal housing and notices about food stamps. These documents were found to be written well above "the limited reading ability of those for whom they were written." (p.19). One solution Chall suggests is to have simpler documents, but she acknowledges that this is not entirely

possible because "the nature of the content makes it difficult to lower readability too much" (p.19). She concludes that:

> "... higher levels of literacy are presently needed and will be needed in the future by more and more adults to meet the demands of work as well as of citizenship and personal needs"(p.26)

The Extent of the Literacy Problem

Judging from the discussion on the difficulty of determining a workable definition for the term literacy, attempting to assign a specific number to the total non-literate adult population is next to impossible. The most common way to determine the demographics of a specific segment of the population is through census statistics. Using this source, researchers obtain information concerning the highest grade level attended. The problem with these data is that grade level achievement does not necessarily guarantee that the equivalent reading and writing level has been attained. Another factor which mitigates against the use of census figures for assessing literacy levels is that the census is a pen and paper activity which requires a certain level of competency to be correctly completed. Although provisions are made to aid those unable to cope with the task, it is likely that members of this group could be missed or miscounted by the census takers.

Researchers, using a variety of sources have attempted to provide some estimates on the breadth of the illiteracy

problem. Chall (1984) estimates that, in the United States, there are at least one million people lacking basic literacy skills (0 - grade 4 level), 23-26 million below the functional level (grade 4 to 8 level), as well as the 51 million new illiterates mentioned above.

The total numbers presented by Hunter and Harmon (1979), were slightly lower, but not enough to constitute a contradiction to Chall. The Hunter and Harmon study was a comprehensive look at the problem of illiteracy in America, reporting in detail the characteristics of the people that made up this massive subgroup of the population (one-third of the population, based on the highest estimate). What they were able to conclude was that individuals without high school completion tended to earn less, were more likely to be unemployed, tended to be members of minority groups, and tended to live in poor, inner-city areas. They referred to these individuals as educationally and socially disadvantaged. Breaking the group down even further, they found that the undereducated were more likely to be old (senior citizen), young (late adolescent or early twenties), imprisoned, or female.

In their discussion of disadvantaged adults, Hunter and Harmon devised four categories:

> Group 1. This group was the easiest to reach and open to recruitment to basic education. They had the highest grade level attainment, and left school because of

circumstances unrelated to learning. They usually had fairly high self- esteem, worked well both in groups and individually, and were financially secure (if not economically comfortable.)

Group 2. This group was less economically and personally secure (underemployed) and usually had a slightly lower grade level achievement than those in Group 1. However, they are willing to participate in education as a means of accessing better opportunities.

Group 3. These people were only occasionally employed in low paying jobs and had to be coaxed to participate in education. They did, however, feel that there was some hope for their children through education and were therefore willing to continue to function within the mainstream of social structures.

Group 4. This group included the hard-core, stationary, generationally transmitted (poor from one generation to the next) poor. They placed little trust in the value of education to effect any change in their lives. In fact, they saw their lives completely out of their control and had little need for reading and writing.

Interestingly, Hunter and Harmon contended, that it was possible for there to be more than one group represented

within a family and that a person could move between groups, depending on his or her life phase. It should also be pointed out that although the people in these groups were disadvantaged, "(e)mployment statistics reveal that the overwhelming majority of those considered functionally illiterate were gainfully engaged in the labour market" (Harmon, 1984). This was particularly true for those in the first two groups.

The preceding discussion in this section has focussed primarily on statistics and social realities within the United States context. Although the Canadian picture mirrors this information to a certain extent, it is necessary to look at Canada as a separate social and cultural entity. Canada shares with the Unitied States a concern over the large group without adequate functional literacy. Thomas's (1983) compilation of Canadian Census data from 1976, shows that overall, those with less than basic literacy amount to about five and one-half percent of the population, while those with less than functional levels total 23 percent (for a total of over four million people.) Where the United States data is weighted in various socioeconomic areas (inner city verses suburbs, etc.), the Canadian data show a regional disparity in educational attainment. The area with the largest portion of the population reporting below grade 8 educational achievement is the Northwest Territories (41 percent), followed closely by Newfoundland (39 percent). The Yukon with 17 percent,

British Columbia at 19 percent and Alberta at 20 percent represent the regions with the lowest number of functional illiterates as reported in the 1976 census information (Statistics Canada, cited in Thomas, 1983).

Comparing the Canadian data with the subgroups identified by Hunter and Harmon (with reference to reported grade levels, not actual functioning levels) shows that older people, those in prison and Native people are more likely to have less than functional levels. Unlike the United States, women in Canada are more likely (though only by a margin of just over one percent) than men to have at least a grade nine education (Statistics Canada, cited in Thomas, 1983).

Thomas concludes her discussion of the census figures by indicating that:

> "million adults or one in fifteen of the Canadian adult population could benefit from some kind of basic literacy training. We can only guess at the numbers who require functional literacy training: it could be several million given the relativity of the concept, the increasing complexity of modern society and the fact that nearly half of the population (47.3% in 1976) have no more than tenth grade educational attainment."(p. 62)

In a more recent Canadian study undertaken by the Creative Research Group for Southam News in 1987, it was reported that 33% of the Canadian population could not be considered literate. Instead of using census figures, the researchers devised their own test and administered it to a sample population, taking care to include different segments

of the population. (However, they did not interview persons above the sixtieth parallel, prison inmates, natives on reserves and members of other isolated groups, such as those living on Hutterite or Mennonite colonies, all of which are suspected of high proportions of low-literate individuals.) To arrive at their percentage, basic illiterates (8%), functional illiterates (16%), and marginal literates (9%) were included. More specifically, they found a geographic distribution of literacy skills much like that reported by Thomas, with British Columbia having the highest percentage of literacy and Quebec and Atlantic Canada the lowest. Considering subgroups, older individuals performed least well on the test, females did slightly better than males, and English language users were ahead of their Francophone counterparts. Another finding, which was unlike the United States, involved the youth category (to the age of 25), they were reported to be more literate than other age groups.

Addressing the Literacy Problem

As mentioned previously, until the 1960's, concern for educating the illiterate adult population was not an educational issue as it was believed that the problem would eventually solve itself with the passing of the older generation. However, as the century progressed, it became obvious that in spite of growing numbers of high school completions, illiteracy was not diminishing.

Government responses to literacy education. Large scale (in comparison to what had been done previously) involvement in adult literacy programs began in the mid-1960's in the United States with the "War on Poverty" and the "Right to Read Movement", and in Canada with the implementation of the Canadian Technical and Vocational Training Assistance Act. In an attempt to address the issues of poverty and vocational training, programs were developed to prepare the targeted population for employment. When it became apparent that many of these people were unable to benefit from the programs because they lacked the necessary literacy skills, policy makers realized there was a need to address the adult literacy issue.

In Canada, education is a provincial responsibility, but employment remains in the hands of the federal government. Because of the link between adult literacy and employability (or trainability for employment), the federal government spearheaded the drive to increase the percentage of functionally literate adults. Two of the earlier programs for ABE (Adult Basic Education) funded by Manpower were Basic Training for Skills Development (BTSD) and Basic Job Readiness Training (BJRT). BTSD provided academic upgrading from the 0 to 12 grade level and BJRT offered a program of life skills for employment. By the mid-1970's, the success of these programs in attracting learners caused difficulties because the program was serving a larger segment of the population than had been intended and

therefore, cost more that anticipated. A new program was devised which, among other things, increased the age for participation to 21 years or older and reduced the academic upgrading component (completely eliminating upgrading below a grade seven level) while emphasizing the BJRT component. Since implementation of the altered plan in 1977, the federal government has only funded ABE as part of its manpower policy, and has slowly reduced its involvement in education.

As federal funding decreased, some of the provincial governments moved to fill the gap, by providing programs at the 0 to 6 level, part-time programs (federally funded programs tend to require full-time participation), and voluntary tutor and community based programs. Unfortunately, with scarce funds for education at all levels and the low priority of ABE, provincial funds have not been sufficient to bring any improvement in literacy levels. This is particularly true for provinces where percentages for those with less than grade nine are the highest (Thomas, 1983).

In recent years, few new initiatives have been pursued by the federal government in spite of its own task force on manpower training (undertaken when the present government was in opposition.) The task force recommended that a conference be organized to advocate for literacy and work on developing materials for tutor training, but nothing has been done to implement these recommendations (The Southam

News Report on Literacy, 1987). In the fall of 1987, the Secretary of State announced that one million dollars in 'development' funds for literacy would be available, but the minister failed to get a "permanent federal commitment to literacy". (Southam News Report on Literacy, 1987, p. 44). What he did achieve was the creation of a National Literacy Secretariat with a mandate to work with the provincial educaton authorities, community groups, labour and the private sector. Norton (1988) suggests that the activities of the government in the literacy field have never had such a high profile as they have at the present and attributes this to "a dramatic growth in public awareness about adult illiteracy, an increase in lobbying by interest groups, and the forth-coming International Literacy Year in 1990"(p. 13). To date, however, the new government initiative has resulted in the funding of short term projects designed to "support literacy education, rather than provide instruction directly"(Norton, 1988, p. 13). The conditions applicants must meet to access these federal funds include sponsorship by non-government agencies, and the commitment of matching grants by the province.

Other than in the province of Quebec, which has taken a strong stand in tackling its adult literacy problem, the provincial response has reflected each individual province's interest in and ability to pay for additional educational programs. In the economically strong provinces, literacy development has been more extensive than in the have-not

provinces, but ABE still has low priority in the allocation of educational funds and is subject, as are most budgetary decisions, to the political climate (Thomas, 1983). In every province and territory there is a core of adult educators who actively engage politicians and bureaucrats in dialogue on basic education, and they help to heighten awareness of the problem and possible solutions. Thomas (1983) sums up her discussion of what is being done in the Canadian context with a thoughtful conclusion:

> "The question to be answered by governments is whether adult basic and literacy education is a right or a privilege. If the answer is 'a right' then policies, initiatives and programmes flow from that principle. If the answer is 'a privilege' then adult basic and literacy education become primarily charitable enterprises, for disadvantaged adults cannot generally afford the luxury of purchasing educational services." (p. 88)

In the Alberta context, the one in which the participants for this study operate, ABE is generally funded by the Department of Advanced Education, and programs are delivered by a multitude of providers from educational institutions to volunteer tutoring programs to community groups. In the case of some full-time students, there are also funds for basic living expenses while attending school available from Alberta Manpower. The recent trend in provincial literacy policy is to promote programs relying on voluntary tutors and part-time learners. This reflects a growing belief among politicians at all government levels that these programs are best suited to tackle the literacy

problem. Institutionally based programs utilizing professionally trained educators are still in place, but costs to offer full-time programs, and fund students in them, tend not to be politically popular.

The programs. Literacy education, because of its changing nature in our evolving culture, is pursued in several different ways. Hunter and Harmon (1979) provide a set of three categories to help describe the ABE scene.

The first category, Tutor and Basic Education, emphasizes traditional literacy skills, that is basic reading and writing skills. Into this group fit the voluntary organizations which provide individual tutoring and some group work. These organizations rely on the good will of volunteers to do most of the instructing and are often organized by non-governmental, non-profit groups. Although primarily concerned with teaching the basics of literacy, functional aspects are sometimes incorporated into the program (real life applications of reading and writing skills.) Also in this category are the major ABE programs provided by educational institutions, such as school boards, colleges, and vocational centres. Again the primary focus is on skills acquisition, with secondary interest in functional aspects.

Category 2 includes the Competency-based programs. Hunter and Harmon describe competency-based education as "an approach that places the skills and competencies needed by

the learner for life - either personal or job-related - above school or other educational institutions"(p. 76). The idea is to encourage people to learn what they feel they need to know in their personal lives, including their work, rather than what is needed to pass an examination. From this concept has come programs which focus instruction on learning to read and fill out forms, to read bus schedules, and to do other similar daily literacy tasks. Much of the emphasis in these programs is on problem solving for individuals on the job and in the community. A reported outcome of such an approach is the enhancement of self-esteem as learners begin to take control of their lives. Hunter and Harmon list the following advantages of these programs:

> "1. The involvement of community agencies, resources people, and institutions outside the strictly educational world.
> 2. Their focus on individual assessment of interests and need, and their appreciation of the background of participants.
> 3. The pressure (from students and the situation itself) to invent methods, materials, approaches, and linkages broader than anything that already exists.
> 4. Their emphasis on outcome criteria and measures that allow learners to start wherever they are and to move at their own pace toward meaningful objectives "(p. 90)

Along with real life literacy tasks, many learners also seek to attain educational accreditation, a specific grade level, a high school diploma, or a GED (General Educational Development certificate), requiring the inclusion of these school related goals in program planning. Linking

traditional upgrading with other aspects of competency has led to the investigation of alternative methods of teaching and learning, particularly in the adult context.

The third category Hunter and Harmon identify is the Broadcast Media. The best example of the use of media for literacy education was the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) extensive literacy campaign initiated in Great Britain during the mid-1970's. Utilizing both radio and television for instruction, it also integrated the use of volunteer tutors by Local Educational Authorities, and provided both teaching materials and tutor training. The Corporation also set up a clearinghouse for matching prospective students and tutors with co-operating agencies in their own geographic areas. Although the number of participants fell short of what had been projected (actual numbers were difficult to assess because it was unknown how many individuals followed the program on their own), the project was considered successful. In their study of the impact of the program, Jones and Charnley (1978) listed four main benefits. The first was that over 100,000 learners sought instruction and, more importantly, over 60,000 individuals came forward as volunteer tutors. Secondly, they thought that the publicity given illiteracy demonstrated to those needing help that they were not alone and that they should not be ashamed to come forward for assistance. A third benefit was the development of materials and methods which could be used as a basis for

expanding literacy instruction, even after the completion of the project. Finally, Jones and Charnley contended that the project pointed out the need for continued effort in ABE.

No other group has undertaken as ambitious a program as that of the BBC, although the Public Broadcasting System in the U.S. and other media groups have developed programs of instruction at different learner levels aimed at an adult audience. The problem with such media involvement in North America, as Hunter and Harmon (1979) point out, is that "(t)he audience that needs to be reached does not at present watch public TV broadcasts" (p. 97).

Participation and Persistence

The preceding discussion provides an indication of the nature of adult literacy programs currently available. Unfortunately, the overriding concern for educators in the field of literacy and ABE is that the programs that presently exist, as limited as they are, fail to attract the clientele for whom they are intended. Once learners are enrolled, there are further difficulties with keeping them in the program. The following discussion considers participation and persistence of the adult learner, particularly in the ABE context.

Participation and Persistence in Adult Education

Most individuals continue to learn throughout their lives and much of this learning takes place informally: from watching, from doing, from listening to others, and from reading. Historically, it is difficult to identify when formal adult education was established, but educational experts report that adult education is the fastest growing field in the educational spectrum. In spite of apparent massive participation, the statistics show that only certain segments of society are involved in the formal lifelong learning process. Participants in adult education are likely to already have more than a high school diploma, be under 55 years of age, not be in the lower socioeconomic strata, and be white, according to the 1979 Anderson and Darkenwald report on participation and persistence in adult education. Other variables, such as sex, marital status and employment status, were reported to have little effect as predictors of participation. The uneven representation of different population segments concerns many adult educators because it represents an inequitable allocation of educational resources.

Much of the early research on participation involved social surveys focussing on who was most likely to be a participant. It soon became apparent that a theoretical base was needed to explain participation so that the relationship between the adult learner and the educational context could be better understood. Boshier's 1973 study

led to the development of a theoretical model of participation in adult education. Known as the Congruence Model, Boshier uses the ideas of growth motivation or intra-self congruence to identify participants and persisters, and deficiency motivation or intra-self incongruence to describe non-participants and dropouts. The intra-self congruence (the relationship between the self as it exists and the ideal image of the self) is broken down into three additional levels in terms of education; self/student congruence, self/lecture congruence, and self/other congruence. The incongruence side of the model also has these three levels. Boshier suggests,

> "that both the adult education participation and dropout can be understood to occur as a function of the magnitude of the discrepancy between the participant's self-concept and key aspects (largely people of the educational environment). Non-participants manifest self/institution incongruence and do not enroll."(p. 261)

He further surmises that "(f)or non-participants, education and institutions organizing it, are alien"(p. 264). This would coincide with the description Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) presented for the non-participant. The fact that people in the lower socioeconomic groups are not generally participants is compatible with the model since:

> "adult education environments (and students) are consciously middle class, so a lower class participant is likely to feel incongruent. Furthermore, because the fewer lower class members who do participate are less inclined than upper and middle class persons to criticize and appraise educational experiences, middle class adult educators get little feedback, so the bias against the lower class attitudes,

values and behaviours is compounded."(Boshier, 1973, p. 264)

Brocket (1983) refers to adults unlikely to participate in organized forms of education as the 'hard to reach'. Like Boshier, he contends that many of the hard to reach adults have had unpleasant experiences with formal educational institutions, but this does not mean that people in this category do not participate in learning. Rather than formal, the learning is non-institutional and self-directed. He recommends that if educators are truly interested in attracting this group, alternate settings should be considered.

Two important motivational factors in participation are interest and need. Knox (1980) analyzed the place of interest in terms of participation. Interest, he contends, falls on a continuum between previous experiences and possible future participation. Making choices, as far as interests are concerned, become decisions between the safe familiarities and risky unknowns. External factors acting on decisions, Knox suggests, include the expectations of peers, accessibility of knowledge regarding expectations of the activity, and the significance of "changes in life circumstances"(p. 8) under which the individual is operating at the time of the decision. He relates this to the idea of 'teachable moments', taking advantage of the right timing for learning.

Need proves to be an even greater motivator in educational decisions for adults. Only when basic needs of food, shelter and personal security have been met can the need for education be addressed, "... until these needs are reasonably well satisfied, it is difficult for the individual to make a commitment to long-term goals like education"(Kreitlow et al., 1980, p. 70).

Another characteristic of personal needs is that they change as the individual progresses through the stages of life and educational need is no exception. As mentioned previously, a change in life circumstances, which could mean a new job, marriage or marriage break-up, beginning a family, an injury, or the like, precipitates the need for increased levels of education (Knox, 1980).

The issue of participation is far more complex than addressed in this chapter, but the preceding discussion provides a basic understanding of the issue. The research on persistence is of greater importance to the background of the study.

The Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) report defined four variables in persistence. Older participants were more likely to persist, as were those with more education (except in the case of ABE or high school upgraders, where there was no noticeable effect of previous schooling). Those who felt a course was helpful were more likely to stick with it, and, finally, the longer the course or learning activity, the greater the likelihood of non-completion. Many

characteristics of the persister are similar to those outlined for the participant. Studying the tendencies of dropouts, Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) determined the most likely candidates for dropping out were younger, unmarried, non-whites with low incomes and low educational attainment. These researchers also looked at the effect of satisfaction/dissatisfaction on the persistence tendencies of adults and found that it did not necessarily correlate with dropping out. "(N)ot all dissatisfied participants drop out nor are all dropouts necessarily dissatisfied with their experiences as learners"(p. 14).

Darkenwald (1981) identifies two types of dropouts: positives and negatives. Positive dropouts are those who leave courses when they have learned specifically what they wanted to learn. They are self-directed learners who utilize educational opportunities fully. Negative dropouts are those who leave for other reasons. Darkenwald provides two reasons for the high levels of dropouts in adult programs: 1) participation is voluntary, "(a)dults typically are not required or pressured (e.g., by parents or peers) to participate and maintain participation"(p. 1); 2) unlike younger dropouts, adults usually experience no threat to social or job status by dropping out of a course. In instances where there are external pressures for participation, Darkenwald suggests there could be the phenomenon of 'mentally' dropping out.

Boshier's (1973) Congruence Model can also be used to explain dropping out. Even for those whose decision to participate was based on intra-self congruence, the cumulative effect of self/other incongruences (though individually they may be trivial) often leads to dropping out.

Interest plays a roll in persistence, as well. As Jorgenson (1988) points out, adults are voluntary participants who will, if they find the content or teaching method inappropriate, "simply choose not to attend" (p. 8). Darkenwald (1981) found that interest or lack of interest alone was unlikely to result in discontinuation, but when associated with other causes was a determining factor.

Participation and Persistence in Adult Basic Education

Other than accessing sufficient funds, the major concern of most ABE educators is recruiting and retaining students in basic education programs. When comparing the numbers of people involved in literacy programs to the number of those with less than functional levels, it is likely that there are people who do not necessarily want to become more literate. Descriptions which paint a picture of the undereducated as marginal people, which Fingeret (1984) refers to as the deficit model, do not represent the perceptions of many individuals who are a part of this group. Fingeret (1973a) and others have found, when studying groups in inner-city settings, that many "enjoy

rich and satisfying lives"(p. 13). Literacy tasks they cannot perform themselves, others within the community do for them. In return, they have duties and jobs which are specifically their domain. Only when these social networks break down do the low-literate members have a need to access education.

Another segment of the low-literate, non-participant population includes those who feel that education and increased levels of literacy will not make a great deal of difference to their lives (Hunter and Harmon's Groups 3 and 4 described previously.) Eberle and Robinson (1980) considered non-participation as a resistance to change brought about by low expectations and aspirations; "(f)or persons with scant evidence that any expenditure of energy on their part will affect the complex of problems in their lives, the expectation of failure may be nearly insurmountable"(p. 18). Similarly, the subjects of Fitzgerald's (1984) study were reluctant to participate because they did not believe that improving their literacy levels would make a great difference in their life circumstances. The people saw literacy as an economic problem which, in the continuum of economic problems, followed needs for jobs, food and decent housing. They also found the programs incongruent in terms of their real life situations, distrusting the professionals who operated the programs, "ABE programs focus almost exclusively on educational needs, whereas the hard-core illiterate's <u>most</u>

pressing needs are primarily of an economic, social and psychological nature" (p. 27).

Glustom's (1983) study of educational needs and motivations found that most non-participants had no quarrel with ABE programs, but didn't see the need to participate until confronted with a "triggering event" which changed their life circumstances. This was found to be particularly true of the younger group. Glustrom concludes, like Knox (1980), Fingeret (1983) and others, that when people are functioning adequately economically and socially, they are "not motivated to commit the time, the effort, and the self-discipline necessary to complete the high school equivalency degree"(p. 21)

Another factor seen to have a deterring effect on the recruitment of participants to ABE programs is the focus on educational goals defined by the educator, not the learner. The ideal, of course, is to get all students to a high school level in reading and writing, but for the individual who is functioning at a basic level, the time required to achieve that goal is substantial. Clark (1980) and others challenge the notion that all ABE learners should be focused on the goal of the GED for "(i)t takes too long, it's too expensive, it's too difficult, what is learned is not necessary for the jobs available, and - the cruncher - that ABE doesn't lead to employment"(p. 24). Kreitlow et al. (1980) feel the population eligible for basic education is "not monolithic in terms of their need for, and motivation

to participate in, the ABE programs"(p. 71), and therefore, it is unrealistic to use high school graduation as the only indicator of success in programs. "(T)he key... lies in the coordination of basic skills acquisition with the satisfaction of more primary life goals"(p. 74).

In spite of these factors, there are individuals who enroll in basic education programs. Once there, however, there is a relatively good chance that they will not stay. Absenteeism and attrition in most programs is high. Researchers seek to understand the non-persister and the variables acting on the individual, with the end desire of providing a better learning experience, and thus, keeping students participating longer.

When asked to provide reasons for leaving programs, most students give non-program related reasons, such as family problems, illness, and employment changes (Cramer, 1982; Myer, 1974; Richardson and Myer, 1974, and Indiana State Department of Public Instruction, 1981). Most researchers, however, seek to find more indepth reasons which could lead to the development of programs to better meet the needs of the learners.

Investigations of non-persisters in ABE have two focuses: personal and motivational characteristics of the learner, and ability and willingness of programs to meet individual needs of the learners. Studies that focus on the individual's characteristics reflect interest in finding ways to mold the student to the program, while the second

group of researchers are concerned with ways programs can be devised to better accommodate the social and learning needs of those most in need. Diekoff and Diekoff (1984) and Garrison (1987) conducted studies to determine, at intake, which students would be more likely not to persist. The first study, centered on the level of commitment as a determining factor in persistence, suggests the establishment of barriers to force potential students to demonstrate a higher level of commitment. This would predict those students more likely to complete, aiding in the selection of 'good' students. Garrison found that "students with lower scholastic ability, lower self-confidence, and greater socioeconomic change may set unrealistic goals for themselves and have unrealistic expectations of the program resulting in an incongruence leading to dropout"(p. 36). Unlike Diekoff and Diekoff, he suggests prospective learners be counselled to determine "realistic goals congruent with their ability and the time they may have to reach such goals"(p. 37).

Taylor and Boss (1985) suggest that persistence can be determined by assessing the students' locus of control. They found that individuals that were internally controlled were more likely to continue than those who felt externally controlled. "Internally controlled individuals are described as likely to believe in their own potential to change their world"(p. 22), and they are, therefore, more likely to overcome the barriers to participation and

persistence. On the other hand, "externally controlled individuals generally believe their destinies and outcomes are controlled by forces extrinsic to themselves such as fate, chance, luck or powerful others"(p. 22) and are less likely to have sufficient commitment to educational changes as it will not make much difference anyway. Taylor and Boss suggest that externally oriented individuals be identified at intake and given special counselling and course content to increase their belief in their own power to change their lives.

These last three studies, and others (Clark and Hall, 1983; Richardson, 1981; and Richardson and Myer, 1974) tend to lay the 'blame' for non-completion (and in some cases, non-participation) on the shoulders of the learner. Other researchers are concerned with the social aspects of literacy (Kazemek, 1984; Resnik and Robinson, 1974; Boshier and Collins, 1985; Richardson, 1981; Meyer, 1974, and Indiana State Department of Public Education, 1981). They seek to rely on adult learning theory, which stresses the involvement of the learner in decisions concerning materials and methods used in the learning activity. Kazemek (1984) emphasizes the joint participation of teacher and student in the assessment of needs and establishment of goals, as well as in the activity planning and evaluation process; "A curriculum is not imposed upon the student"(p. 67). Resnik and Robinson (1974) would like to see learners "not only select their own learning activities and manage their own

time, but also to affect certain basic organizational features of the institution"(p. 10). In this way learners begin to take responsibility for their own learning. The learning experience is likely to be more meaningful and useful in their lives.

The Meyer(1974), Richardson(1981), and Indiana State Department of Public Instruction(1981) studies express concern over the use of the term "dropping out" because of the negative connotations ascribed to the word. The fact that individuals found difficulty in attending classes regularly is understandable, Meyer contends, as many of the ABE students are poor and often outside the mainstream of society, making standard schooling practices impractical in relation to the realities of their lives:

> "Poor people, and the so called rejects of our society, have problems in surviving. Their life is one of constant change as outside forces continuously affect them. They need time and patience. Patience and time. The books must be open for them. The door of our center, and other centers must be open to them" (p. 28).

The report from the Indiana State Department of Public Education suggests that programs make allowance in their instruction for irregularities in attendance, emphasizing that even the lowest level students will derive some benefit from attending classes. They believe that educators should not despair over high attrition rates, but seek to provide the best experience. Their recommendation is for an

'optimum approach' which provides for clear and simple instruction, allowing for students to come and go.

An important aspect of these three studies is their focus on the measurement of success in terms of the learners' own definitions. In this context, functional literacy is not a sociological or educational theory, but a reflection of the needs and social interactions in the real lives of the learners.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The research design for this study was developed from the paradigm of naturalistic investigation. In this chapter, the process by which the sample was selected and the data were collected are described. Also included is a detailed description of the characteristics of the sample, including demographic information, as well as individual perceptions of previous schooling experiences.

Selecting the Sample

The process of selecting a sample from basic education program leavers proved to be a problem as it was difficult to locate these individuals. Even with the assistance of program administrators supplying the names and last known addresses and telephone numbers of possible subjects, locating a sufficient numbers of willing participants was difficult and time consuming.

The criteria used for selection of subjects were:

1. persons who had started in full time programs at the 0 to 6 grade level, and

2. persons who discontinued programs by their own decision, including those terminated by the institutions for failing to attend class.

The first criterion was established because people at these levels were less likely to be able to deal adequately with print media and, therefore, had more at stake in learning new literacy skills than adults at higher levels of literacy development. Lower skill levels also meant that they needed a greater long term commitment to the education process. The second variable was included because it was important to consider the subjects actions in terms of their own decisions and perceptions, not those imposed from external sources (for example, the decision of program administrators that an individual is not making sufficient progress to continue in a program.) Those terminated by the authorities for attendance regulation violations were considered acceptable for the study because, being fully aware of the policy, they opted to not follow the regulation. Failure to observe the regulations was tantamount to a formal withdrawal.

The sample was selected from lists of former participants in two programs in a large city (programs A and B) and in one program in a smaller city (program C). Program A was part of a large adult training centre which provided both academic upgrading and vocational training programs. Program B was a Continuing Education program

connected to a local school board. The third program, C, was an upgrading program sponsored by a regional college.

To obtain the optimum sample, the selection process in the two city programs was begun in the early part of February, the beginning of a new term for these programs. The timing was important because it allowed for the inclusion of individuals who had been expected to continue their studies, but had failed to return in the new term. Subjects from the third program were selected in the fall as it became apparent that relying on the initial two programs was causing difficulties in location of sufficient numbers of persons.

Different methods for collecting lists of prospective participants were required for each program. Student records in all programs are confidential, and obtaining personal information, such as last known address and phone number of former students, required following different rules for each institution. Following the formally prescribed procedures, I obtained the necessary information from programs A and B.

Program C was a less formally organized program, and therefore, personally accessing the records was possible.

Two individuals interviewed were referred to the study by other participants, and were also named on lists supplied by the programs.

A total of 69 names were eventually identified as potential participants in the study. Contact was initially

made by telephone. Of the original lists, 28 persons were contacted and 20 interviews were conducted. Of the other 41 names listed, either no phone number was available or, when numbers supplied were called, they were no longer in service. No attempt was made to select the sample through a statistical sampling process as it was difficult to find enough subjects to meet the criteria of the sample selection. Table 1 shows the distribution of subjects selected, according to their programs.

Table 1

Selected Subjects According to Programs

Program	Initial List	Contacted	Participated
Program A	34	12	7
Program B	23	9	7
Program C	10	5	4
Other	2	2	2
Totals	69	28	20

Of the eight people contacted who did not participate, only two completely refused to be involved in the study. Three of the remaining were unable to make arrangements for interview times because of work schedules (one worked out of

town and two were working at more than one job). The three remaining individuals repeatedly cancelled appointments or did not show up at preafranged locations. This action was interpreted as a lack of interest in the study and I did not pursue individuals past a second failed appointment.

Collecting the Data

The data for this study were collected through personal interviews with the participants. To direct the interview, an Interview Outline was constructed with questions concerning demographic information and educational and work history, as well as questions designed to probe into the influences of personal and social variables on the educational decisions of the subjects (see Appendix A). The questions were designed to be open-ended in an attempt to gain greater insight into the perceptions of the subjects. The outline was divided into eight sections:

1. Personal history
2. Educational history
3. Employment/vocational history
4. Methods of dealing with reading and writing requirements
5. Decision to participate
6. The program
7. Discontinuing studies
8. General recommendations and comments

As suggested in the title of the interview document, the questions provided only an outline for conducting the interview. Not all questions were asked of all participants, as some of them had been answered in the discussion of other questions. An attempt was made to cover all 8 subtopics. Supplemental questions were asked to develop ideas or comments elicited in response to interview questions.

All subjects were first contacted by telephone and supplied an explanation of the research. At the beginning of all interviews, the purpose and procedure of the research were once again explained. The subjects willingness to participate was confirmed, and their rights as participants and the obligations of the researcher were defined. The subjects were assured that the information they supplied would be held in the strictest of confidence and that their names would not be used in any presentation of the data. Each person was also told that he/she was welcome to withdraw from the study at any time and offered the opportunity to ask any questions they might have before we began the formal interview activity. No incentives were offered for the cooperation of the individuals, although it was made clear that the staff and administrators of the programs were interested in the outcomes of the research, and hence, participants' experiences might promote changes in programs which would assist other students in the future.

As only one interview of each participant was conducted, it was important for the interviewer to establish rapport with the subjects in order to gain indepth insight into these people's lives. To this end, the interview often began with a general 'chat' with the subject. This tended to allay anxieties and created an informal atmosphere in which to begin probing the individual's perceptions.

All interviews were recorded on audiotape for later transcription, as it was felt note taking would hinder the flow of conversation and could result in important details being missed or misinterpreted. Subjects were informed that all tapes would be erased following the conclusion of the study. None of the participants seemed bothered or intimidated by the presence of the tape recorder. The interviews lasted from 50 minutes to two hours as time limitations were not considered.

Following each interview, the researcher spent some time debriefing by compiling notes on impressions of the interview and the individual. The audiotapes were reviewed and information concerning the first three subtopics, involving personal, educational and employment history, was transferred to printed copies of the interview outline. Interview details concerning the remaining four subtopics were transcribed verbatim. Any comments relating to the other subtopics, that were made in the discussion of the first three subtopics, were also transcribed. Some words or phrases were lost in the transcription due to background

noise (children playing, television noise, or difficulty in understanding an accent), but an attempt was made to ascertain the gist of the conversation. This method of recording the data was chosen because many of the questions in the first three sections were close-ended and required little more than a one word or short phrase answer. The verbatim transcripts were an attempt to ensured that details were not missed from the replies to the more open ended questions.

Piloting the Interview Outline

The difficulty in accessing possible participants presented problems in piloting the interview overview with many participants. Hence, following the first two interviews, the information obtained was reviewed in relation to the interview questions, to ensure that the wording and content of the questions were clear to the subjects. For several questions the wording was changed from "Do you remember how you felt ..." to "How did you feel ...", as the latter wording presented the opportunity for greater discussion. Other changes to the wording were minor. Because the data collected from the pilot sample showed little difference from that reported by later participants, these original interviews were included when the data was analyzed.

As previously mentioned, the outline was only used as a guide for the interviews, but of greater importance in terms of acquiring data from the subjects were the supplemental questions based on the participants initial answers. To sharpen the researcher's skills at following up answers, a colleague was requested to review one of the two initial interview tapes and point out where improvements could be made on the depth and quality of the discussion. A major criticism noted in the interviewing approach was the tendency to paraphrase questions before allowing the subject sufficient time to answer the initial question. It was also suggested that the paraphrase did not necessarily ask the same question as the original had. In several cases alternate wording was suggested for supplemental questions to make them less specific, that is, less directed by the researcher's preconceived notions of the probable answers. A further suggestion was to have the subjects provide examples to clarify specific points. Although specifically oriented to the first two interviews, these suggestions were found to be a useful critique on the interviewing technique, and provided a reference which could be consulted to ensure the research maintained a consistancy over the long period of data collection.

Characteristics of the Sample

Answers to the questions in the first three sections of the interview outline provided background and personal histories of the participants. The following is an overview of the data obtained from these questions (also see Table 2, p. 52)

In total, 10 males and 10 females were interviewed. This equal split was arrived at by chance, not by any sampling design. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 50, with a mean age of 36.4. Fourteen subjects were living with spouses, three were single parents and three were single. All but the three single individuals had children, though in five families, the children were all adults. At the time of the data collection, nineteen of the subjects lived in urban settings and one in a rural setting. Eleven of the nineteen reported having spent their childhood in an urban setting.

Most participants were from families that would be considered large by today's standards. Three quarters of the sample (15) were from families of five or more children while half of the group had nine or more siblings. The large family tradition extended to the participants' families as five had families of five or more children.

TABLE 2

SHORT DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE SUBJECTS

SUBJECT	SEX	AGE	CHILDHOOD HOME	FIRST LANGUAGE	PRESENT EMPLOYMENT	OCCUPATIONAL GOALS
1	M	36	Edmonton	English	Unemployed	Work with kids in recreation
2	M	33	Poland	Polish	Unemployed back injury	Counter person, auto repair shop
3	F	29	Jamaica	English	Unemployed new baby	Nursing aid program
4	F	26	Edmonton	English	Unemployed training prog.	Office records management
5	M	47	Medow Lake Sask.	English	Unemployed	Heavy duty machine operator
6	M	36	Jamaica	English	Unemployed	Goldsmith
7	F	43	Wabasca Albt	Cree	Housekeeper	Work in hospital
8	F	50	Ft. Vermil-lion, Alta.	French,Cree English	Janitor	Secretarial work
9	F	27	Edmonton	English	Store ckerk	Unknown
10	M	21	England	English	Museum technician	Own business
11	F	21	Grand Forks B.C.	English	Pharmacy clerk	Equestrian manager
12	F	44	St. John's Nfld	English	Babysitter	Medical lab technician
13	M	47	Edmonton	English	Unemployed	Journeyman carpen-ter
14	M	42	Lebanan	Arabic	Unemployed	Salesman (?)
15	M	36	Trinadad	English	Unemployed	computer programmer
16	M	50	Holman, Alta	English	Unemployed back injury	Salesman (?)
17	F	37	Bonnieville Alta	Cree	Unemployed	Daycare worker
18	F	39	Plamondon	French	Unemployed in school	Own sewing business
19	M	27	Jamaica	English	Unemployed	Get a trade
20	F	37	Ontario	English	Unemployed	No specific goal

For 14 of the participants, English was their first language, though this number included four persons who spoke a Carribbean dialect. Five had English as a second language: two subjects originally spoke Cree, three first learned Arabic, one learned Polish and one learned French as a first language. One person reported knowing French, Cree and English, though not all languages were used fully (words in each language were used in the home).

Immigrants (New Canadians) represented 35 percent of the sample, although five (20 percent of the sample) were familiar with standard English before arriving in the country, having obtained some schooling in English.

All participants spent at least some time in school as children. Nine of them reported having attended high school (grade nine or better). Of the seven persons who repeated grades, three reported repeating two or more. Only one subject said that he changed schools many times, while six said they missed 'a lot' of school time. Nine of the total group reported having had trouble with reading and writing from the very beginning of their schooling, five more were identified as having difficulty in the primary grades, two had adult English as a Seconnd Language instruction, one said the literacy difficulty wasn't noted until the higher grades (junior secondary), and one insisted that he had no trouble in school. Special help, in addition to regular instruction in reading and writing was offered in public

school to six of the participants, while the remainder said they had little or no extra help with their difficulties.

At the time of the interviews, 14 of those interviewed were unemployed, while the remaining were employed one of the following occupations: housekeeping, janitorial work, retail clerking, pharmacy clerking, babysitting, and Museum technical work. Of the unemployed, one was back in a literacy program and six reported injuries or conditions which prevented them from working at previously held positions, most of which were in the labouring or trade fields. The majority of these injuries involved backs (four of the seven). All participants report working at some type of job at some time in their lives, most in the physical labour occupations (factory jobs, sewing, cleaning, labouring) or in service industries (store clerking, babysitting, short order cooking). Three people reported having been foremen or supervisors. Six subjects reported having to deal with reading and writing on the job, and another three noted that some reading and writing was required. Only three of the participants reported that they received on-the-job training courses while one person had just completed an Office Management Course.

Analysing the Data

The data recorded in the written transcriptions had to be organized into comparable units to determine the presence of trends or reoccuring themes. The first step was to colour code the individual interviews for identification. The initial organization of data was based on the interview questions. The transcripts were divided into units that reflected comments or answers to these questions. Similiar units were joined together under a single heading. The colour codes made it possible to determine if one speaker had focussed on a particular subject.

Next, the information under each of the headings was carefully read and scrutinized for the emergence of general themes repeated across the range of subjects. Where similiar comments were made by more than one subject, note was taken. Some comments, though not specifically referring to a topic, were interpreted to fit into existing themes. This helped to reduce the volume of data, and began to reflect trends in answers and comments.

This process of analysing from the specific to the general then required further classification in categories of themes. The categories more specifically reflected the research questions which were the basis for the development of the study. They also reflected the distinction between personal and institutional variables that played significant roles in the participants' perceptions of education and

schooling. They provided the framework for the discussion of the data and development of conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents an overview of the participants' interview responses. Participants' responses were analyzed with the intent of identifying common themes and elements instrumental in the decision process of the participants. Although each individual was unique in his or her learning needs and expectations, many themes were recurring, reflecting common experiences shared by the adult learners of this study. Two general categories of variables, personal and institutional, emerged as important in the decision making process of the participants, and are discussed in the final portion of the chapter.

Results of Interviews

Living with Limited Literacy Skills

At work. Being unable to read and write very well had varying effects on the subjects interviewed. Some individuals spoke of opportunities lost in employment due to a lack of prerequisite literacy skills. One man recognized the need for reading in daily life, "a person's gotta have - know how to read and write now-a-days ... signs all over the place that you gotta read."(Subject 5) Those who were

functioning at the upper range of reading and writing skills levels (levels four, five or six), however, did not feel handicapped in daily functioning. In employment situations, individuals were more aware of the handicap of inadequate literacy skills. Most subjects reported that they did not hide their lack of skill from their employers. The employers would, in turn, limit the amount of reading or writing required, usually minimal in the types of jobs held by the participants. Some individuals confessed that they had either refused promotions or had not bothered to seek employment in areas where they believed they might have to read or write.

At home and in the community. Although willing to tell employers of their literacy difficulties, this openness did not transfer to peer situations. Subjects were more likely to hide their lack of literacy in social situations for fear of what might be said or thought about their overall ability to function (many subjects related situations where they had been laughed at or treated as mentally deficient by others when they were 'found out'). One middle-aged woman who had gradually learned to read in her adult years bitterly reported, "everyone thinks, well, if you can't read and you can't write, you can't do anything."(Subject 12)

For several subjects, their writing ability was at least two levels below their reading. This was a source of great frustration because even though they could grasp concepts, they were unable to express their understanding in

writing. One individual (Subject 10), whose general background knowledge was very well developed, noted frustration at being unable to demonstrate his theoretical knowledge because he couldn't cope with the usual paper and pencil tests used to assess that knowledge level.

Participants also spoke of having to put pride aside, having limited privacy, and having little control over their own lives. Relying on others often meant having to wait on others' convenience. All but one individual (Subject 15) in the study acknowledged using a third party to assist in reading and writing tasks, at least some of the time. Most of the aides were immediate family members, though three people had a trusted friend who helped. Some, who could read or 'figure out' a piece of written information, sought a second opinion of a reader to confirm they had understood the message in the written text (Subjects 2 and 19). They blamed a poorly developed vocabulary for their lack of confidence in understanding, not an inability to read. It seemed that for some people, reading (word calling) and comprehension were unrelated tasks. For those at very low reading levels, this lack of confidence in understanding vocabulary also transferred to oral communication. Three individuals confessed that before they had been to school they were afraid of answering or using the telephone other than for informal conversations with friends (Subjects 7, 17 and 18).

Most of the participants of this study did not really consider themselves part of a service network as described by Fingeret (1984), in which they exchanged different services for reading or writing done on their behalf by another person. In most cases, the reader/scribe was a family member, spouse, child, sister-in-law, or girlfriend. The reading/writing exchange was only part of the overall exchange of services normally found in a family setting. Asking a family member to do the reading or writing was viewed the same as doing the dishes, baby-sitting, or picking something up at the store on the way by. In marriage relationships, the reading/writing task was assumed as one of the duties within the spousal division of labour. One man, married for twenty years noted,

> "It's a lot of time, sometimes I help her around the house, to do this, do that. Well, I would say that I do something for she to read - write a letter or read a letter for me, you know. Because it doesn't matter, if I could still read and write, or still help her around the house, you know." (Subject 6)

When a non-family member was the primary reader/writer, the service exchange notion was much more obvious. One subject (Subject 12) who relied on her roommate, said that whenever she went out in her car, she felt obliged to take the roommate as she felt indebted to her. Another individual (Subject 17) said she paid a family member to drive her to a medical appointment because she was afraid to go when she couldn't read the names on the signs. The

payment was more for the transportation than for reading, however.

Another theme developed by two of the women who had started programs at very low levels was that of fear of the world outside their own homes (Subjects 17 and 18). Both reported that they had been reluctant to do activities such as attend doctor's appointments or do grocery shopping on their own. Two others (Subjects 9 and 12), though not as fearful of the world, mentioned feelings of isolation attributed to lack of reading/writing ability.

Being Cheated. An image sometimes used in popular literature to portray the low literate adult is that of someone duped out of much-needed money by unscrupulous sales people. When asked if there had ever been a time when they had signed something they shouldn't have, only one subject (Subject 13) admitted to having been taken advantage of. He felt certain that others could have been caught in the same trap of signing an unknown document rather than admit publicly that they had difficulties reading. Most subjects insisted that they never signed anything they didn't understand and that they took someone else along who could read or asked the other party involved to read the document for them. One subject described a hypothetical situation with a contract this way:

> "Us (il)literates, we got a few things going for us alright, but it's not a nice thing to say. Lots of people will try to pull things over

> on you, you know. Well I've learned things the hard way, eh. And that's why I'd never trust people now-a-days, you know. I trust my wife or kids, and that's all. If anything like that, I'd go to a lawyer first, you know. I wouldn't take just anybody's word for it ..."(Subject 5)

Another individual related an incident in which her sister took money she had given her to pay bills and used it for her own. "That bothered me, but I let it go. It was my fault; I didn't go there. I should go there myself." (Subject 17)

Participation in Literacy Programs

All participants interviewed for this study, faced with having to cope with printed material, had developed strategies or networks of reader/scribes to assist them through the routine literacy necessities of our information society. So why did they turn to school to extend their literacy knowledge?

Reasons for participation. The subjects in this study answered with a variety of responses. The most commonly stated reason (mentioned by 12 of the subjects) for individuals wanting to go to school was to increase their general level of knowledge and develop better reading and writing skills. Comments included, "I just wanted to get a little bit know-it-all, little bit more knowledge about what's going on,"(Subject 20) " I want to get as much education as I want, as I can."(Subject 3) Other reasons given for the decision to go to school included a desire to

do better quality work on the job, to find some different type of employment, or to qualify for a 'better' job (employment needs were mentioned by 11 subjects), e.g., "I want to read. I figure that if I go to school I'll get a better job, too."(Subject 17)

Some of the older participants who had been involved in the workforce for many years described how the workplace had become more complicated and the need to read and write had increased. One man noted that the blueprints used in the construction industry were getting more and more complicated and he was nervous of making mistakes that could endanger men under his supervision. He spoke of needing "the knowledge and to build myself up to at least a grade 12 level of education. And to get my reading."(Subject 13) He then went on to describe how he "loved reading history" and that he had wanted to improve his reading so that he could better understand the history books he liked to buy.

Six of the participants had decided to seek educational upgrading because they were unemployed. For most of these individuals, the notion of getting help for their literacy difficulties had been considered and rejected when well-paying jobs were easy to find, particularly for the men. Participants in this group saw schooling as an opportunity to leave the manual labour force and find or train for less physically demanding and perhaps more economically stable occupations. One person saw it as a way of gaining

accreditation (a journeyman's ticket) in an occupation in which he had worked most of his adult life (Subject 13).

For four of the study participants (Subjects 2,6,14 and 15), the decision to enroll in the programs was a matter of necessity rather than choice. These people had been injured on the job and were no longer physically able to continue in occupations that had given them a comfortable middle class lifestyle. Unable to work at what they knew best, and in at least two cases liked to do, these people had to face retraining for new, less strenuous employment. Without the necessary reading and writing skills, the only kinds of jobs open to them were in the low-paying service occupations.

At least three of the study participants indicated that they had applied to the upgrading programs in order to complete high school credits Subjects 4, 11 and 15). While most of the participants spoke of attaining a specific grade level, usually grade 12 because that is what most employers require before an application is even considered, two of the respondents (Subjects 6 and 20) emphasized that they were not particularly interested in attaining that level. They, instead, opted for enough reading and writing skills to get along in the world:

> "I just wanna, that I can read and write a little. That if someone show me a letter, that I could write a letter or something like that, then I can do it... I just want to learn to read and write that I can help myself, or help my kids if they're in a little difficulty or anything like that."(Subject 6)

Three individuals spoke of a desire to be able to spell better (Subjects 3, 4 and 9) citing writing difficulties as the major block to their progress as children in school and later at work:

> "I always wanted to spell properly."(Subject 9)
>
> "...when I went back it was mainly because of my spelling. Because I've turned down jobs because of my spelling..."(Subject 9)

The fact that these people's reading levels, though not as low as their spelling, were still well below high school level did not seem to attract the same concern from the learners.

For a few of the subjects, achieving the higher educational levels was really more of a dream than a functioning goal:

> "Well, if I had a chance to keep going, I'm not a fast learner, anyway, but if I had a chance to keep going and finish, I think I could finish and go to college. Even if I got started grade nine or ten, I'd be so happy to just be able to sit down to the table and read (a newspaper.)"(Subject 12)

Those starting at the very lowest levels of reading were hoping just to learn to read and write. They knew that aiming at the higher academic levels would require a very long term commitment and they were not interested in that:

> "And from when I started school, I said I don't want to go to maybe grade eight or nine. I just want to go to school that I can read; that I can fill up an application; I could write a letter; I could read a letter; I could help my kids if they want. You know, the basic thing..."(Subject 6)

The concern for helping children with schoolwork mentioned by this respondent was echoed by two other participants. In many cases, the individuals included more than one reason in their comments.

For two-thirds of the group interviewed, the timing of the move towards education was precipitated by a crisis of some sort. For some, their decision to participate came at a time of major upheaval in their personal lives, while for others the crisis was less traumatic. Three of the women interviewed (Subjects 4, 9 and 18) had sought to better their education and skills because they needed to find employment in the wake of a marital break-up. These women were particularly concerned about finding jobs that would provide sufficient income with which to raise a family as single parents. With low levels of literacy and education, it was difficult, if not impossible, for them to be accepted in employment training courses.

Life stage was the driving force behind the decision of two of the participants(Subjects 7 and 8). Both of these people were women who had recently seen their large families become independent and recognized this as a time for developing their own interests. The programs were seen as a way to develop new skills for a change in occupation as in the past they had always worked at domestic jobs (house cleaning or sewing.)

Finding out about literacy programs. None of the programs which the subjects in this study had attended publicly recruit students, and hence, the students had to find out about the programs through their own means. Half of the participants said they found out about the programs from friends or acquaintances. Many had friends or relatives who had also attended Basic Education or Upgrading classes. Three of the participants who suffered from injuries were advised by Compensation counsellors to seek education or job training that would enable them to do less physically demanding jobs. The counsellors provided placement in a program for one of the individuals, while the other two were told to find a place for themselves.

Making the decision to participate. The decision to begin a school program for basic education or upgrading is often considered difficult to make, especially for people at low literacy levels. However, over half of the respondents of this study said that it was a not a difficult personal decision for them. In many cases the subjects had considered further schooling over time but were either unaware of its availability or unable to take advantage of programs offered at that time. For those experiencing a personal crisis, such as a broken marriage or unemployment, the decision was a natural consequence - a method of dealing with changing life circumstances. Only one participant spoke of being stopped from applying out of fear, "I wanted

to go desperately bad, but I didn't have the nerve to call." (Subject 3)

For most of the subjects, finances were the primary consideration in their decision to attend. Fourteen of the subjects were being fully funded by either Alberta Vocational Training grants or Social Services, four were supported by the Workers' Compensation Board, and two were handling their living expenses on their own (one had a student loan.) Tuition for all students was covered by provincial government programs. Prior to attending classes, all of the students were receiving either Social Assistance, Unemployment Insurance or Workers' Compensation Benefits. Several of the participants complained that the funding was really not sufficient, particularly in light of the long periods of time they were facing to effect the needed change in educational levels. Some of the men found it particularly difficult to leave the role of breadwinner for an indefinite time while being supported, to a large extent, by a working wife.

Getting started. In almost all cases, once the decision was made to upgrade skills, the participants immediately contacted the various programs to apply for admission. Most subjects reported a sense of accomplishment and pride at having taken such a positive step in "doing something for myself." However, due to the structure of the programs, most students had to wait several months before being able to begin classes. During this time, some of the

older subjects reported having doubts about their ability to learn. Others were worried that the work would be too difficult for them. One subject told of missing the first few days of school because of a family obligation and deciding to not attend until receiving a call from the program counsellor saying there was still a place for him, "So, boy, I just scooted 'er down there and got in there, you know."(Subject 13)

One subject said that he was so eager to start to learn that he enrolled in a night school class that began immediately (Subject 6). This prepared him for the full time program, which he joined when space became available.

Only two subjects left their initial contact feeling negative about the possibility of entering the programs. For one person (Subject 11), it was a shock to learn that she was three grade levels below the level she had reached in high school. Her initial reaction to this information was reluctance to even try to upgrade; however, she changed her mind after considering her decision for two weeks. The other individual had applied to another program prior to the one in which she eventually enrolled. She recounted how her initial contact with a counsellor for the first program had left her completely demoralized. She reported that the counsellor did not want to accept her into the program because she would have to start at such a low level. The counsellor apparently advised her that she would be better off "sticking with" her part-time job in a department store

(which paid $5.50 per hour) and that she should try to get full time work with the store.

> "Like, I didn't want to.., I wanted a better career. I was working on a career, but I didn't have the education to do it... So when I come home, I was really upset... I felt really angry at her because I felt I had taken a big enough step to admit, like, I do have a problem. And when you got somebody sitting there telling you there's no hope for you, I think you feel more embarrassed, and more discouraged."(Subject 9)

The subject went on to say that had it not been for a friend who obtained information about alternative programs, she would not have pursued the subject of further education.

Support for Participation

Support from family and friends played an important role in encouraging the participants to carry through on their resolve to improve their literacy skills. Many reported that their families were fully behind them, providing both moral and financial support. In five families, when the study participant expressed the desire to upgrade his or her skills, the spouses exerted pressure to encourage the initial contact with the program and remained an influence in perseverance later. Several subjects commented that they felt their spouse or family had been disappointed because they had not continued. Children of the participants offered tremendous support by encouraging and helping their parents. Two subjects attribute their participation in upgrading with the return to school of

adult children to complete high school requirements (Subjects 8 and 13).

Enthusiastic support from the family was not always the case, however. Three people reported that their spouses didn't care if they went or stopped, which may be indicative of spouses who were not totally in favour of the schooling. This is particularly true of the individual (Subject 5) who commented several times that his wife could have given him extra help at school and another participant whose husband felt there was too much counselling going on in the instructional materials. Some participants also noted that they were faced with detractors who made them feel, if only temporarily, that they would not be able to learn. Individual family members or friends thought it would be too difficult and not worth the bother. However, these reactions did not appear to deter the individuals from pursuing their goals. Participant's comments included, "... if you want something you'll get it if you try hard,"(Subject 3) and "I know I can do it, if I just had the time and some help."(Subject 1)

Two of the subjects who reported receiving little support from family attributed this to the fact that they had been in educational programs before and had not completed them:

> "At first they liked it that I went back to school but they didn't like it for me quit and go back, quit and go back. They says, 'If you want to go to school, you should stick to it.'"(Subject 17)

One woman became involved in a power struggle with her estranged husband. She described how he would tell her that she would "not amount to anything, so why bother". (Subject 18) She believed that he wanted to return to the family and was threatened by the independence she might attain through her education. Rather than defend her ability to shape her own life, she maintained she was doing it for the benefit of the children. Another subject suggested the support offered by the family was too great a pressure, as he did not have the same level of confidence in his own ability (Subject 13).

A surprising source of initial negative feeling involved the teachers and counsellors of the programs. Following an attempt by teachers at the beginning of the term to present a realistic picture of the what could be expected, one participant reported being shocked and discouraged. The student had expected to receive praise for having the courage to come forward and seek help: "I figured since I've taken this big step, like, you know, I'm going to be sitting in this classroom ... the first thing they're going to do is give you a pat on the shoulder..."(Subject 9) Although commending the students on taking the initiative, the teacher proceeded to deliver a lecture on how much work they were going to have to do, the method of promotion to the next level, and the consequences should they not progress to the next level in two terms

(students were told they would not be accepted for another term.).

> "... you could have seen everybody's faces, you know, and right there you thought, I'm never going to make this program.. And then you got so down on yourself, like you were scared." (Subject 9)

Another individual (Subject 4) reported how she had outlined her educational and employment goals to the counsellor, and a few weeks later was told these goals were unrealistic in terms of the length of time it was going to take for her to realize them. The student was devastated because she had really counted on going into a specific line of work.

Impressions of the Classes

For those entering the classroom for the first time, the first impressions of the programs were a mixture of interest, fear and uncertainty. Older students were particularly unsure, believing that they would not fit in because of their age. They also feared being unable to learn.

Three of the subjects talked about fear and embarrassment at having admitted they had a problem with reading and writing:

> "Well, at first I think you feel scared, you know. Second of all, embarrassed, because you do have a problem. And I, you function for such a long time with blocking out that part of your life, that you learn to live with that, and it's a big step (admitting it)."(Subject 9)

They indicated they were surprised to find so many people with the same problems, some with even lower levels of literacy than themselves. Discoveries of this kind and the perception that the teachers really cared about them as people, helped the uncomfortable students overcome their fear and reluctance.

For most of the participants in this study, schooling in their youth was not a positive experience. Many had felt isolated through a lack of attention and had experenced few successes. Some felt victimized by other, more capable students. In returning to school as adults, the general consensus for all but two subjects was that their recent experience was much more positive.

Almost all participants mentioned the informal atmosphere maintained in the classroom and the friendliness of the teachers. They interpreted this treatment as respect for them as adults. This helped to allay some of their initial anxieties about returning to school and promoted enthusiasm for learning. Two people expressed surprise at their own interest in attending classes and their willingness to do homework. One student, only a few years out of the regular school system, summed it up in this comment:

> "I'd get up every morning and look forward to going to school, which is nice, isn't it."
>
> (Interviewer: What do you think made you feel that way?)
>
> "Just the instructors, they were easygoing.

> They explained everything. And if they wanted to have something done, they told you right away, which is really nice. I don't know why I wanted to, but I did my homework, too, which was really surprising."(Subject 20)

Some of the subjects specifically referred to the attention they received from the teachers when they were experiencing difficulty with work:

> "You weren't pushed aside. Whenever you needed help it was there for you ..."(Subject 13)

> "And to have teachers back you up, even when you were stuck or that, you know. They were willing to help. They were there and they would take time out of their own time, if you needed help. All you had to do was ask and it was there." (Subject 13)

The subject of mutual respect of the students for one another was mentioned when the participants were asked about how they felt being back at school as an adult. It is likely that these comments were rooted in memories of peer rejection and feelings of inadequacy experienced in childhood and youth. The following comment reflects one person's memory of school, and although not representative of all the participants' comments on the subject, it illustrates the experience of many:

> "...Well when I was a kid, they used to make fun of me and there (in the program) they didn't. Well, I was so skinny and long and lanky andstupid, and everything else. And there, well, they were just grown up and nicer. It was just nicer, nice atmosphere."(Subject 12)

One of those dissatisfied with the program she was in commented that, although she was treated as an adult, the content of the instruction was juvenile(Subject 4). She

felt she had adequately covered the material in elementary and junior high school, and wanted to get on with higher level materials.

Of the negative comments concerning first impressions, some related to the number of second language students in the basic education classes. One respondent (Subject 9) felt that these students shouldn't have spoken their first language amongst themselves, while the other person (Subject 4) felt that the quality of education was negatively affected by the inclusion of these students, slowing the progress of those attempting to achieve a grade 12 level. When probed, this subject was unable to clearly explain why she thought this was so. This subject also said she initially had difficulty relating to her fellow students from social backgrounds that included chronic poverty, broken homes or "bad experiences in life". In time she learned to accept and deal with the other students, "... I was so prejudice against other people, it just, I found out what other people were like and how they were living, which I was amazed."(Subject 4)

One subject, whose first language was not English (Subject 2), found that the English course he took did not meet his need for developing vocabulary and writing skills. Two others, who had attended programs in the late 1970's, commented that, although they were not coming to this program with specific expectations, they had hoped it would

not be like the former experience. They were pleased that it was not.

Once involved in the actual learning situation, all but three of the participants in this study had very positive feelings about the experience. For most, this was due to the atmosphere established in the programs. Many of the people commented on the comradship of the students and their willingness to help one another. This seemed to be a confidence and esteem builder for many of the participants and was cited as a lasting change, even after the students were no longer in school.

One of the students who experienced an attitude change from positive to negative (Subject 1), blamed it on the move to a higher level. He commented that he had enjoyed the informal teaching style of the first class he had been in, but found that the more formal teacher/student relationship in the higher level was not conducive to his learning. The student found the purpose for some of the learning activities unclear, and thought them time consuming and lacking in relevance.

Three people commented that they appreciated how the instructors had found their weaknesses and attempted to address them: "...they brought you down to where your level was and they built it up slowly. They didn't force everything on you."(Subject 13) One man, who received special help with vowel sounds, felt this was the most helpful aspect of the program. However, some others felt

that their individual needs were not always pursued and therefore, did not feel that they had been particularly successful, in spite of recognised improvements in other areas:

> "I think I'm just as poor a speller as when I went there. My comprehension is better. And my reading, like before never thought I had a reading problem because I could pick up a book and understand it, but pronouncing words and stuff has gotten a lot better." (Subject 9)

Five respondents (Subjects 1, 4, 9, 13 and 14) commented that they did not feel their time had been well spent in working on electives or subjects outside of reading/writing. They believed that they could have made better progress in learning to read and write if they had been given special instruction in spelling or word identification. This may reflect the perceived need of the individual learners to become more literate, not to achieve a higher overall level of education.

Why They Stopped Participating in Programs

The reasons the participants gave for their decision to discontinue programs can be grouped into four major categories: medical, financial, family and personal considerations, and the programs themselves.

Medical problems were the reason given by six members of the study sample (Subjects 2, 6, 7, 14, 16 and 17). In all cases the subjects were advised by their doctors to stay

home and rest, for at least two weeks, and in two cases, for longer periods. In conjunction with the teacher and counsellor, the students decided that they should leave the program and return when fit to do so (at the beginning of another term.) All of these people said they would like to return in the future, in spite of some complaints about the program. One of the people in this category had recovered from the medical problem but had obtained a job and had decided to postpone resuming her studies for awhile (Subject 7).

Financial considerations were the reason provided by a further five of the participants. Three of these people were scheduled to return to their programs following the summer but had decided to continue working to reduce debts incurred while studying or to meet other financial obligations. Funding had been available to all of the five, but it was not enough to meet all their needs over a long period. These people also commented that they would like to eventually go back, if not to the same program, to some type of Basic Education classes, such as part-time or evening programs.

Anther reason for leaving involved family and personal considerations. Two women felt compelled to leave school because of family crises: one to escape the harassment of an estranged husband, and the other to comply with an order to stay home, issued by Social Services because of fears of inadequate care of her children.

A third woman, who had originally become involved in the program following a marriage break-up, became reconciled with her husband and decided to leave the full-time program with the intention of returning to continue her education when her child was older. Her son, she said, had not responded well to being left in daycare and then objected to a lack of attention at home because of homework. Although she noted this as the primary reason, she also had some reservations about the organization of the program, feeling the stages required to finally reach high school level were redundant, needlessly slowing her progress towards reaching the grade 12 level. She also felt more time should be spent on gaining the basics, especially spelling, rather than learning how to cope in life, "...there was too much counselling in the school and not enough teaching."(Subject 9) Another classroom difficulty for this individual was her paralyzing fear of having to read aloud. It created high levels of stress that made her sick to her stomach and resulted in her leaving class on several occasions. In her interview, she attributed her decision, in part, to this ever present fear.

One person failed to return following a summer vacation because she did not like having to drive 30 miles in the winter to attend classes (Subject 12). She, too, said she would like to continue, commenting that the concentrated effort of working on reading and writing everyday was

superior to having a tutor for a couple of hours a week, her only alternative to the program in town.

Another participant, in his early twenties, decided to pursue an athletic career while he was in peak physical condition, rather than continue working on his reading and writing skills (Subject 10). Although he felt he had learned to read better, he did not believe the literacy program could really make any difference to whether or not he was successful in life. Unlike many of his fellow students, his knowledge of politics and world events was extensive and he felt intellectually beyond much of the content material explored at his reading level. This participant also noted, in passing, that he felt some resentment towards teachers who seemed to accept him as an equal in class, but changed their attitude when other teachers were around.

Finally, one man decided he had not been learning enough because he was so slow, and he felt he should give up the space in the program to someone who could better utilize it.

Dissatisfaction with the content of the program was the final category of reasons for discontinuing. Three individuals fit into this category. Two felt they had been placed far below their actual levels and resented being in the assigned classes (Subjects 4 and 15). Both felt the material beening covered was too simplistic and not challenging enough for them. They felt they were capable of

handling high school level material and that the time spent in the program had been wasted because they had learned nothing. Both people had specific employment goals in mind which required completion of grade 12 and further post-secondary training.

The third person in this category, though unhappy with the program, was not as disgruntled as the previously mentioned pair. He claimed to have decided to leave the program because he did not find the teachers very responsive to his needs. Having started with a different set of instructors for whom he had great respect, the change had been unpleasant. He did not like the new teachers' relationship with the students and he did not understand why he was asked to do certain tasks. Underlying these personality differences, however, was his disappointment at learning part way through the program that he would be required to attain a higher level of academic upgrading before he could enroll in specific training for the vocational field he wished to pursue. He had based his career decision on his experience as a volunteer, feeling that he was well suited to the vocation. When he began upgrading, he had been told that he would require a minimum of grade 10 to be allowed into the college program. Later, however, the counsellor told him he would need grade 11 and then later he was told grade 12. As he started at a grade 3-4 level, the prospect of spending years in school before even starting the specific vocational training discouraged

him and he became less interested in the learning activities. His feelings were illustrated in the conversation he reported having with the counsellor just prior to leaving:

> "... If I just keep going and I'm not really interested any more, or thinking that I'm not learning anything any more, I says, somebody else should be taking my place and really doing good."(Subject 1)

For all the people interviewed in this study, the decision to discontinue their studies was a difficult one to make. In almost all cases, the desire to raise their educational level was very strong, and in some cases, an urgent need. Those suffering from medical problems had little choice but to follow doctor's orders, but others spoke of regrets at having disappointed supportive family members. For a few, the decision was a financial inevitability when the bills added up, or in the situation of one individual, when it meant deciding between education and owning her own home: "It was very, very hard and sad, because I learned a lot last year."(Subject 8) One person was helped in the decision when he received a notice saying his $34 Alberta Manpower training allowance would not be continued the next year because he hadn't made sufficient progress (Subject 5). This supported his belief that he was not able to learn much more. One of the dissenters was angry and frustrated because she was not going to be able to

accomplish her dream. She also said she was scared because she did not know what she should do next.

Going Back

Regardless of why the subjects discontinued their studies, all but one person said they would be interested in returning to an upgrading or basic education class at some time in the future. Many, however, stipulated specific changes that would be required or greatly desired for such a return. The responses offered in answer to this question on returning provide a good indication of how different the needs and desires of each of the students were and how programs need to be much more flexible in order to accommodate the individuals enrolled. As each response was unique and clearly demonstrated the variation among the students, several individual responses are presented below.

One of the participants, forced to leave the program because of severe pain, made it plain that if he was physically able, he would not be in school, but would be back on the job that he had left: "And I don't really know if I would even be considering going to school myself if I didn't have the back problem."(Subject 16) He had felt that he had a good secure job, at which he could stay until he retired. If anything were to happen to that job, he had felt that he would be able to get another through the hiring hall at the union because he had a journeyman's ticket in his trade, and a 25 year pin from the union. His employers

had been aware of his low reading level and did not demand he be able to work at a job requiring reading and writing. Faced with the reality that his physical condition would likely prevent him from returning to his trade, he needed higher literacy skills to find some other kind of employment and was, therefore, strongly motivated to continue his studies, when well enough to do so. He had spent a short time in the program, and had no quarrel with its administration or delivery.

The subject who had his target for upgrading adjusted upwards twice (Subject 1) would have liked a program based less on an established grade level curriculum and more specifically oriented to the particular field of employment he wished to pursue (working with teenagers.) He did not expect to compete with university trained social workers, but wanted to know more about adolescent psychology and related topics that would contribute to his already demonstrated aptitude in the field. At the point when he was interviewed, he did not see the point of returning to the program simply to improve his educational level.

The subject whose young son responded unfavourably to her full-time participation would like to pursue her education through part-time or evening classes once her son is in school, as this would disrupt the family least. She saw it as a potential help for her child, as they could set aside time in the evening to work on their homework together: "...I thought I'd wait until (son) was in school

and has homework himself, and maybe we could make a family thing of it. Like, don't even have the TV on a couple of hours in the evening, just sit down and do your homework together."(Subject 9) She was also adamant about not having to read aloud in class.

Another man, also injured on the job, was involved in a conflict with the Workers' Compensation board over funding of his schooling (Subject 14). He felt that because he needed to find a non-physical job, he needed to know how to read and write in English. Although he could have gone to school without the funding, it was a matter of principle for him. There also seemed to be poor communication between him and the counsellor at the program. He believed that he would not be able to continue in the fall because there would not be space for him. In fact, although the program in which he was involved no longer conducted full-time classes at his level, there were half day classes for which he would have been eligible.

In the above case, and in many others, attempting to cope financially while attending school full-time created psychological roadblocks to learning. In the case of the individual who wanted high school level classes and was not willing to work on his particular weaknesses to bring his reading up to that level because it was going to take him too long, a higher level of funding might have tempered his impatience.(Subject 7) For the individual living 30 miles from the location of the program, a move back to the

city would allow her to continue. Although there was a possibility of continuing her studies with a tutor, she felt that the full time classes were of greater benefit because she felt she needed the repetition and time to absorb the learning.

On the other hand two other individuals said they would prefer part-time situations. One of these people wanted to be able to pay for her schooling herself and to attend part-time because of family obligations. (To obtain government funding, including tuition fee coverage, students must be enrolled for a minimum of 25 hours of instruction per week.) As the tuition costs were high in relation to her somewhat limited income, having these fees covered would be sufficient support for her to continue.

The other individual considering a part-time program (Subject 14) had achieved the GED (General Equivalency Diploma) since leaving the program but wished to actually complete grade 12, primarily because she said most employers had no idea what the GED was, and therefore, it really couldn't be considered equivalent.

The participant who had decided that he was not able to get a great deal more out of schooling indicated that he might consider going back some day, although he did not miss his studies and was tired of going to school. Because he had remained at one level for so long, he found the materials and work repetitive.

The individual who felt he would not be interested in going back to the program, did not believe the program provided the kind of learning he really wanted. He acknowledged that he had made some advances in his reading and writing ability, but he was seeking more from education:

> "I'm searching, I would like like to - I like to learn. Learning to read and write is OK. You know, it's fine, it's good, you know, if I want to be at that level. But I want to learn something else as well. I think if I went back, it would have to be college or university."(Subject 10)

He said that even his teacher felt that he didn't really fit into the program.

Two subjects with definite vocational goals felt the programs should include salable skills or courses specifically oriented to particular career objectives. The perception of these subjects was that programs ought to be more specifically tied to vocational training.

Of the other participants, not specifically mentioned in this section, one had already returned to a program (Subject 18) while two others were waiting for openings (Subjects 6 and 7), and two more were seriously considering contacting the counsellor to be placed on the waiting list for the next term (Subjects 8 and 11). Two people were attempting to get their financial situations stabilized before attempting to continue with school.

Did the Program Make Any Difference

All of the people responding to this study, even those who were dissatisfied, believed that the program effected some positive changes in their reading and writing skills. Participants commented on being able to spell better and therefore, being more willing to write letters, or having improved their ability to "break words down" to aid in identification and get more out of what they read:

> "I can read and understand a bit better. When I'm reading a story, I don't have to go back and double check what I just read..." (Subject 11)

The majority of participants commented that they now read a lot more than they did before, and read things they would not have even thought of reading prior to attending school. The man who enjoys reading books on history added several volumes of local history to his collection. He said he has to struggle with some of the words but he can get a adequate amount of them. He also claims to be far more tolerant of his wife when she is engrossed in a novel:

> "And I wasn't reading and that, and I was watching TV, and I said to her, a couple of times I said something. And she says, there you go again. And I used to get so mad because she wouldn't talk, you know. Maybe an hour or two hours in the book. But I seen the time when I was going to school here when I done the same thing. I'd get into one of them books and I'd forget, you know, at least an hour or two, if it was really good. Well, the whole world, it go, I'm there just there by myself in that book." (Subject 13)

Three other people reported that they are now able to read the Bible for themselves and that this is important to them. A woman, who started at a very low level, said that she is able to read and remember songs from song books, a goal she had established from the beginning (Subject 17). Another subject noted that the oral reading in class taught her how to pause in the appropriate places and thus made her reading more understandable and interesting for her child (Subject 9). Still another individual from a non-English background said he reads better, "...the class put me in the mood to English, to read English."(Subject 2)

The most interesting effect and the one most commonly expressed by the students (mentioned by half of them) was the increase in self-esteem the learning experience brought to them. Participants spoke of feeling pleased about taking the initiative to go to school. Many found, after years of being convinced they were not very smart or could not do anything, that they could indeed learn. Regardless of whether the students had successfully completed their programs or not, they found some level of success. The result of this, for some of the women particularly, was a noticeable improvement in self-assurance and ability to speak up in groups. This was recognized not only by the individuals themselves, but also by family and friends:

> "... but even (husband), like he says he can tell, too, since I've been in school, like, I've gotten more sure of myself. ... I think a lot of people have. Like, when I went back to work, a lot of the girls had said, 'Oh,

school was good for you.'"(Subject 9)

"All I know is that my language communication that has really helped, like in my job situation and stuff, you know." (Subject 8)

Along with general reading and writing improvements, many students said they had learned other skills that they were able to put to daily use. Two people spoke of learning how to use chequing accounts at banks, a service they had never before considered using (one woman had never had a bank account before attending the program.) Another respondent said that a business procedures course had helped her organize her personal records: "It's really helped me how to, you know, do my own filing, like, for my bills and take better care of myself, and that sort of thing."(Subject 8) Class visits to the public library taught one subject how to use the library and now she and her son visit their local branch regularly. She feels that this will be a great help to her son in preparing him for learning to read (Subject 9).

In spite of these important personal gains, it did not appear that the advance of literacy levels had much of an impact on the employability or earning power of the individuals in this study. For those physically able, most had returned to the type of work they did before going to school. Some participants felt that they were better able to cope with the job and fellow workers than before attending, but there had been little change in overall wages earned. One subject said that he had tried to advance to a

better job within the organization in which he worked, but was told that he was not suitable for it. As he had worked for the same employer prior to attending the program, he felt that he had not been given credit for attending school, nor offered a chance to show that, with his new skills, he could do the job:

> "And I felt that I could cope with it. I wouldn't have applied for it if I didn't think I could cope. But I was denied the opportunity. I was, that door was closed. ... I went there, I went for the interview, and I said, 'This job I'm interested.' No way. This is your job here, he looked on a list and pointed it out. That was it." (Subject 10)

Summary and Discussion

Intrepretations of the interview data were grouped into two general theme categories: those related to personal or human variables and those related to institutional or non-human variables. The first category involved comments regarding individual needs (basic versus higher level needs), dependency, encouragement to continue, communication breakdown, and attitudinal changes towards written language. The second category included comments on non-personal variables such as funding needs, curriculum and program requirements, and facilities and equipment. The following is a summary and discussion of each of these theme categories.

Personal Variables

Dependency. To some extent, all the participants in this study were dependent on family members and friends for help with reading and writing tasks. The fact that two-thirds of them were in long term, permanent relationships may be a reflection of this dependency (though there are no hard data to support this conjecture). However, the majority of the participants did not consider their reliance on others to perform these tasks as dependency. Instead, they saw it as part of the normal distribution of domestic tasks within the family. The fact that one partner in the relationship took care of paying the bills and dealing with written correspondence is not unusual, even for couples with literacy competence. Where strong dependency did exist, it took a disruption of the situation (separation from the partner) to trigger the desire or need to attain higher skill levels.

The lack of independence generated by the inability to read or write adequately is often viewed by literate individuals as one of the greatest handicaps of the illiterate. However, those with low levels of literacy do not necessarily hold the same view. Fingeret (1982) found this to be particularly true in social settings where there are significant numbers of individuals with low literacy levels. Like the respondents of this study, Fingeret's subjects viewed themselves as part of an interdependent network of people with different skills to share. The fact

that all the participants in this study had undertaken to improve their reading and writing abilities suggests that the status quo of their literacy abilities was not sufficient in all contexts, but most did not feel deficient within their own social network.

In the situations where strong levels of dependency appeared to exist, there was a sense that this dependency had declined since the individuals had participated in the program, although the overall change in literacy competency was not great. Participation in educational programs promoted an increased sense of self-confidence, resulting not only from an improvement in reading and writing skills, but also from the realization that the individual was able to adequately survive on his or her own. Increases in self-confidence were also reported by those who had not considered themselves dependent.

Encouragement to continue. In spite of a strong and sincere desire to improve their skills, most of the subjects interviewed required considerable encouragement to first attend a program, and then to persist in attending. Most participants were adamant about the strong support they received from families and friends. Even with the help of these supporters, however, many of the learners reported discouragement, often generated from what they perceived to be unexpected sources - the teachers and counsellors.

Already on precarious psychological ground with respect to belief in their own ability to learn, some of the students found discussions with counsellors and speeches from teachers at the beginning of terms exacerbated their existing fears. In an attempt to present the expected levels of performance in realistic terms, teachers and counsellors fed their uncertainties, creating learning barriers for those most unsure of their abilities. The constant fear that they might not 'pass' into the next level, and the rumours that with this failure they might be excluded from the program, interfered with some students' ability to do their best work. In fact, the nagging fear of failing to meet the necessary standards was a contributing factor in some decisions to discontinue programs.

In direct contradiction to their perceived deterent role, instructors were also attributed with providing encouragement to students. Most participants reported that they felt the teachers really cared about whether they made it through or not. This was seen as a marked departure from the learners' prior impressions of teachers' desires to help them when they were youths in school.

The apparent contradiction concerning the instructors could be explained in relation to the different functions they must perform. Not wishing to delude or mislead students in the initial stages of their program participation, and in an attempt to outline what they expected of the learners, the instructors presented the

realities of the situation. Although a hard-line approach, they likely felt this was necessary to help students establish realistic expectations. Once involved in the instruction, the teachers were sincere in their concern for the success of the students.

Similar findings were reported by Lewis(1984). She emphasized the significance of 'rooters' or those who encourage - mainly family and friends. As with many of the subjects of this study, Lewis reported that children were particularly strong supporters. She also found that teachers and counsellors, though not 'toxics' (those who disavow the efforts of students), were not considered encourgers, but rather 'resources' (those who supply information.) Some subjects of this study felt this was true of their instructors, particularly learners intimidated by the frank discussions of expectations at the beginning of classes. Most students, however, interpreted the instructors' role as one of 'challenger' (in Lewis's terms), in other words, as mentor or prodder.

A further parallel between this and the Lewis study involves the role of the individual in promoting learning. Lewis found that the greatest toxics were the students themselves. Many of the subjects of this study expressed doubts and concerns about their ability to learn, thus creating a need for a great deal of external encouragement.

The development of greater self-esteem was vital to the persistence of individuals in programs. Participants needed

to know that they were indeed able to learn as many entered programs with strong doubts about this. Success in classroom assignments initiated new self-confidence. Small gains which allowed for immediate assurance, at least initially, were important in ensuring the learner persevered long enough to come to the realization that he or she could learn to read and write. Also, students were encouraged to help one another and this was important in promoting the idea of participants as learners (when students were able to help one another, they had visible proof that they had learned something.). Resnik and Robinson (1974) suggest that allowing students to have responsibility for the learning of others contributes to their interest in learning and their motivation to continue. However, when the subjects felt they were not progressing as quickly as they should, the desire to persist in the program diminished. This was related not only to their fear of failing to meeting program standards, but also to their precarious feelings of self-worth. Balmuth (1988) also refers to the difficulty of maintaining interest of the student, and consequently their retention, if they do not perceive they are making progress.

Perceptions on progress have implications for the establishment of educational goals. Because the emphasis is on the attainment of senior levels of literacy (grade 12 or the GED), individuals beginning at the lower levels are faced with the prospect of years of study. They want to progress quickly so they can capitalize on the opportunities

they believe will be available to them with higher educational qualifications. If progress is slow, the future for these students is viewed as an almost endless tunnel of schooling and relegation to long-term low economic circumstances. Both intrinsic (desire to learn) and extrinsic (possibility of a better paying job) motivators are not sufficient to counter-balance the frustration of having to make such a long term commitment.

Individual needs. It is important for educators to remember that attainment of basic literacy skills, no matter how important they appear in this technologically advanced culture, is not at or near the top of the basic needs continuum. For many individuals, keeping a roof overhead, providing food on the table, and maintaining families together are of far greater importance, especially in the immediate sense. When basic personal needs are in jeopardy, learning inevitably has less priority. It is obvious that both physical and psychological needs have to be addressed if persistence in programs is to be expected.

The study participants were keenly aware of their needs, both basic and higher level. Many equated the ability to be more financially stable, and therefore, better able to provide the essentials for families, with the attainment of a higher level of education. It was also painfully obvious to many of the subjects that they had a long way to go to meet educational standards that would allow for the desired changes in employment status. Those

who managed to persist in programs for several months, while living on limited finances, found it increasingly difficult to keep up with family needs. In many cases, students were able to earn more than the training allowances provided, and this became a factor in their decisions to withdraw. They did not change their belief regarding the long term benefit of higher education, but rather, opted to satisfy immediate needs.

In their discussion of non-participators in ABE programs, Kreitlow, Glustrom and Martin (1980) and Glustrom (1983) refer to these individuals as having unmet social, economic, and psychological needs which, until reasonably well met, pose difficulties for individuals "to make a commitment to long term goals like education"(Glustrom, 1983, p.20).

Communication breakdown. Although counsellors/ administrators/teachers attempt to keep learners informed about their progress, from the response of participants, it was apparent that they felt little control over decisions made concerning their learning (program placement, instructional materials, promotional policy, etc.) Several felt they had been unfairly treated in terms of placement and promotion policies, citing this as a major reason for their decision to withdraw. Some students also queried the level and subject matter of the material used in their class, commenting that they already knew the content and

concepts and were, therefore, wasting their time. Those who perceived themselves to be at higher levels than evaluation suggested, needed to understand where discrepancies between the two lay. Furthermore, some subjects felt that they were not fully consulted concerning their achievement on term-end evaluations, reporting that although they had achieved the criteria for advancement according to the testing, they were told they not really ready to go on to higher levels of upgrading.

Although decisions were made by counsellors and teachers with the best interests of the students in mind, there did not seem to be sufficient consultation with students to circumvent misunderstandings. Fuller explanations of how and why decisions were made may have provided for greater understanding. Students also needed to have a better understanding of why work was assigned in class. Opening up better lines of communication between the student and teacher on an individual basis may have enabled the student to voice concerns on utilization of valued learning time.

Inadequate communication concerning the establishment of career goals was another source of discontent. All of the researched programs required students to focus their schooling on future career goals. For some of the subjects, goals were ambitious, considering the low educational levels at which they were starting. When goals were deemed unrealistic, students were often advised to make

adjustments. In some cases this advise was devastating to an individual who had long held dreams of a specific career. When presented with the realities of attaining their goals, students often came to the same conclusion as the counsellors had. However, in some cases, the damage had been done and negative attitudes towards the programs prevailed, ultimately contributing to the withdrawal of the student before significant changes were attained in literacy levels.

Attitudinal changes towards written language. Participation in basic education classes seemed to have positively affected the participants' attitudes toward written language. Even for the subjects who believed themselves adequate readers prior to enrolling, the experience was perceived as having improved their ability to decode words. This made them more confident when having to deal with everyday reading tasks. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, participants reported that they now read a greater variety of materials and also sometimes read for pleasure, although reading never had been a pleasurable activity before.

Although they perceived themselves as readers, the subjects were less likely to consider themselves as writers, in spite of the fact that they had made advances in this area as well. Most of those interviewed still felt very self-conscious of their poor spelling ability and this made

them reluctant to write. However, they did perceive a measure of improvement and noted that they were not as reluctant as they had been in the past in dealing with daily writing requirements such as writing cheques. Learning to effectively use a dictionary provided a liberating tool for occasions when written discourse was unavoidable.

Participation in the classes also had an effect on the learners' ability and confidence to use oral language. Some of the learners had been painfully shy prior to their involvement in classes, but now they felt better able to communicate in public settings. Some participants reported that they not only felt they had important ideas, but also, that they could better express these ideas.

Although none of the subjects made large gains in their reading and writing ability, most left the programs feeling a little less alienated from the literate society. The fact that most were keen to return to some kind of basic education program in the future attests to their belief in themselves as learners and readers/writers.

Institutional Variables

Funding. In any Adult Basic Education programs there never seems to be enough funding to make more than a small contribution to the total need for adult literacy education. Shortages of funding limit the number of student spaces in programs and also limit the participation of those who need it most. Except for the two individuals receiving temporary

compensation pensions from WCB, all the subjects spoke of difficulties of managing family budgets on their small allowances. All of the subjects knew that they would require several years of upgrading to effect any change in their ability to earn a living, and it was difficult to commit themselves to this process when they knew that they must exist on funds which made no provision for unexpected expenses.

In order to qualify for funding, subjects were expected to adhere to rigid attendance criteria. Although justified by the need to weed out individuals interested only in an easy source of income, the necessity to follow the rules presented difficulty for those with family or medical difficulties. The attendance policy seemed to be established to eliminate the few who would take advantage of the program, but resulted in creating hardship for the majority of the serious students who might need special consideration. Rather than create a poor attendance record that might affect future consideration for funding, some of the subjects opted to withdraw, fully intending to return at some later date. Mezirow, Darkenwald and Knox (1975) refer to this as the 'Tyranny of Attendance', suggesting that it is a hinderance rather than a facilitator of persistence.

Personal funding was not the only problem alluded to by study participants. Many also recognized that the money available for the financing of programs (the teachers, materials, equipment, and physical plant) was inadequate to

deal effectively with the problem of adult literacy. Although thankful for what financial commitment there was, it was clear that all those involved, including the learners, that there was a shortfall in relation to the extent of the need.

Curriculum and program requirements. The aim of all of the programs in which subjects participated was to advance students to a grade 10 or matriculation level, as these are the levels required by vocational training programs and many employers. This reflects the relationship between education and employment that is pervasive in our society. In order to meet the grade level goal, programs in basic education must follow a prescribed curriculum modelled on that of the regular school system. Unfortunately, the prescribed curriculum does not necessarily match the needs and desires of the adults it seeks to serve. Most, but not all, of the subjects interviewed expressed the desire to achieve high school levels of education, but in most cases, this was because they recognized the need to demonstrate these levels to get into vocational training courses.

Individuals who are beginning their studies at the 0 to 6 level are facing an enormous, time consuming educational task. They often have specific goals in mind and find the general curriculum materials don't address these goals. The content they are learning is pursued for the sake of learning alone, as part of the store of knowledge which may

or may not be useful in the future. Although there is nothing wrong with accumulating general knowledge, it is difficult to justify this type of deferred learning to individuals who are seeking to stabilize their basic needs by tapping into the middle income workforce. What was desired by some of the study participants were courses that more directly pertained to the vocational areas they intended to pursue.

Should support funding be more readily available, the learners might be more tolerant of the accumulative knowledge philosophy of education. The unfortunate reality of vocational education is that attainment of certain grade levels is a gatekeeping device used by administrators in the selection of participants for training courses. Hence, even if basic education programs were to provide vocationally appropriate curriculum, students would not be acceptable to the vocational trainers (unless changes were made in the entrance requirements, an unlikely prospect due to the existing oversubscription in many programs.) Clarke (1980) suggests that educators should actively challenge the system which promotes the artificial imposition of general education and work with employers to "break down ridiculous hiring policies that demand unreasonable amounts of education of applicants"(p. 24). Of course, not all learners are motivated by vocational needs. For those who are seeking to improve their reading and writing abilities

to better cope and function in daily life, general knowledge learning is desired.

Further complicating the delivery of basic education programs is the often wide variation of adult learning rates and styles. Some study participants commented on difficulty in keeping up with the coursework while others found they could have handled more difficult material. This underlines the need for flexibility in the provision of programs.

Besides the fact that the learning materials used in courses did not reflect the vocational objectives of some of the learners, other negative comments were also directed towards these materials. At the lowest levels of reading ability many of the reading materials used were found to be repetitive and uninteresting. Particularly for those who did not progress through the materials quickly, having to repeatedly work with this material became drudgery. On the other hand, for some individuals, particularly at the higher end of the levels included in the study, the materials used did not present a sufficient challenge. The overall consensus was that instructional materials did not often reflect the interests of the learners. Cornell (1988) and Jorgenson (1988) both refer to the need to use materials that directly relate to the learning objectives of the students in order to maintain their interest and participation.

Facilities and equipment. The physical surroundings housing two of the three programs were cause for comment by the study participants. In these two situations, participants complained of cramped conditions, poor ventilation or poor heating, and the general feeling of a lack of permanency and commitment. Although grateful to be able to participate in this kind of educational program, they felt they were not really a major concern to the educational authorities. The perceived lack of permanence may have had a spin-off effect on the commitment of the students to long-term involvement.

Adding to the make-shift appearance of the programs was the use of cast-off school desks and assorted furnishings. These made studying uncomfortable for many of the learners, particularly those with physical problems. Even in situations where better furniture was available, it was not particularly comfortable for those with back problems. This physical discomfort was a serious hindrance to the learning progress of some of the students.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was undertaken in an attempt to find reasons why individuals wished to participate, then discontinued that participation in basic literacy programs. This chapter includes an overview of the data collection, as well as the conclusions, implications and recommendations resulting from the analysis of the data.

Overview of the Study

In all adult education, lack of participant persistence is a source of concern for administrators and educators. Research shows this to be particularly true for adult basic education. To better understand the participation motivations of adult basic learners, this research was designed to explore the variables that affect the participation decisions of learners in basic adult education programs.

The research focussed on learners who had discontinued their involvement in programs at grades 0 to 6 reading levels in three basic education programs, two in a large city and one in a smaller centre. Of the 69 names obtained from institution records, 28 individuals were contacted, and

20 participated in the study. Using a prescribed set of open-ended questions, the 10 males and 10 females between the ages of 21 and 50 were interviewed individually. The interview questions included topics covering personal information (personal, educational and employment histories), strategies formerly used to cope with reading and writing tasks, factors leading to decisions to participate and later discontinue participation in learning programs, and recommendations from the learners for improvement of programs to better facilitate student persistence.

All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were colour coded by participant, and then carefully read and organized into comparable units, formulated from the interview questions, to determine recurring themes and patterns of comments on participation and persistence. The data reporting was also organized following the structure of the interview, and involved detailed descriptions of the similarities in responses given by the participants.

In the final discussion, the data were organized into two general themes: personal variables and institutional variables. The personal variables included the issues of dependency, encouragement to continue, individual needs, communication breakdowns, and attitudinal changes towards written language. Institutional variables included

discussions of funding, curriculum and program requirements, and facilities and equipment.

Conclusions

Personal Variables

Dependency. Without the ability to adequately cope with reading and writing tasks in the modern post-industrial society, individuals are going to be dependent on others to perform these tasks. However, not everyone views this as dependency, but rather, a part of the general sharing that takes place in everyday society. Lessening dependency, however, was a motivating factor in participants seeking literacy programs. In some cases, the need arose out of a change in social structures which forced more self-reliance, while for others it was the recognition that to have to depend on others limited the scope of action in which the individual was able to engage (for employment or personal purposes.)

Persistence. The participants in this study, having all discontinued programs, provided insights into the types of encouragement needed to overcome the factors interfering with persistence. Some participants of this study found discouraging agents in two surprising sources: themselves and the teachers and counsellors. For the learners, the length of time needed to make a significant difference in

employability made it very difficult to maintain enthusiasm in the process. Furthermore, many of those with low levels of reading and writing doubted their personal ability to learn anything. Coupled with these two persistence blockers, the attempts of instructors to establish realistic expectations only served to convince some of the participants that they would not be able to succeed on the terms established by programs.

Instructors, on the other hand, were also attributed with providing support to learners and creating positive learning experiences. By meeting with success in learning activities, participants could begin to build a belief in their learning abilities. This kind of encouragement is extremely important because learners see instructors as the authorities on education, and when combined with the support offered by people within the social context of the learner, it helps to overcome the internal doubts experienced by the learner. Lewis' (1984) conclusion that "(a)dult educators should make a serious effort to address the issue of institutional and personal support systems in order to increase ratios and improve persistence patterns of all adult basic education students"(p. 78) seems to be consistent with the needs of the adults in this study. Her emphasis on practising a wholistic approach, with consideration of not only core curriculum, but also the individual's interaction with family, friends and life experiences, is applicable to this context.

Meeting basic needs. Every subject interviewed for this study spoke of the difficulty of supporting a family or maintaining oneself while facing the prospect of spending several years upgrading skills to levels that would make a real change in individual lives. It was obvious from the perspective of the learners that very little individual help with providing for those needs was available. Although this is not specifically an educational issue, research has shown that failure to address these needs mitigates against learning and attaining learning goals.

Poor communication. Although programs seek to keep learners informed on various aspects of decision making, it was apparent that there was a communication breakdown. In some instances, learners felt that they had been mislead or misinformed about decisions directly affecting their learning program. This misinformation ranged from assignment of individual learning activities to decisions on advancement in the program. The misunderstandings that developed out of this inadequate or misinterpreted communication sometimes lead to pervasive resentment and ultimately contributed heavily to decisions to abandon the programs.

Attitudes and language. In spite of difficulties individuals may have encountered in the learning process, almost all participants in this study reported a greater confidence in dealing with reading and writing. This indicated that although programs may not satisfy all learner

needs, participation in such programs helps to improve self-image and confidence in oneself as a learner.

Institutional Variables

Although not the focus of this study, it was apparent from the discussions with learners that institutional considerations, particularly funding questions, curriculum and program requirements and physical surroundings, interacted with the personal variables to discourage persistence of individuals.

Funding. Funding problems generally reflected on the basic needs to provide food, shelter, and security for themselves or their families that were of primary importance. These needs had to be addressed before educational concerns could be dealt with. Insecurity over the maintenance of basic needs was an overriding concern of all individuals in the study, and therefore, it is logical to conclude that if more adequate financial support were available, there would be a greater likelihood of persistence.

Curriculum Content Dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction over curriculum and program content was an additional source of irritation to participants in the study. Programs were perceived to rarely recognize adults' immediate and specific learning needs, and instead, tended to be based on deferred learning that looked to the attainment of the grade level required for the advancement into more specific employment

training. Learners needed to clearly see how their learning experiences could be related to their immediate lives.

Poor Physical Surroundings. Finally, because of the physical environment of two of the three programs, learners in these programs lacked a sense of permanency or commitment to the basic education programs. Although this study did not prove that a perception of lack of commitment on the part of educational authorities to adult basic education was a contributing factor to lack of learner persistence, it is possible to conclude that makeshift premises are often uncomfortable, and therefore, are a hindrance to the learning process.

Implications

As mentioned several times in this study, dependency on others to perform reading and writing tasks is one result of low level literacy capacities. To place too much emphasis on this dependency, however, is to minimize the capabilities of persons with low levels of literacy. Those who are in this position, although cognizant of their disadvantage in the print society, still view themselves as contributing members. They also, however, recognize that there exists a need to become fully literate. When it is demonstrated that becoming more literate means having to rely on others less, individuals develop a greater degree of self-confidence and

decrease their dependency. Consequently, programs should place emphasis on the creation of independence in both thinking and action. When learners are lead through learning materials such as workbooks with tasks that are far removed from 'real' reading and writing, they are not encouraged to interact with the printed/written word as persons proficient with written language do. Instructors need to ensure that learners make the transition from instructional materials to real life reading and writing rather than leaving to chance the development of self-confidence and self-reliance in literacy.

Recognizing the need to improve reading and writing skills and then seeking educational programs to meet this need is the beginning of a long and arduous process for most learners at low levels of literacy development. Being able to perservere in the learning process for the time it takes to bring about significant change requires a mammoth commitment of time and energy. Only a few of those who begin at these levels are able to persist to achieve enough gains in their reading and writing to enable them to make significant changes to their economic status.

Many factors contribute to the inability to persist, including both external and internal forces, but the most influential is self-doubt. Although this is an internally created barrier to learning, it is fed by many external sources. It is important for instructors to ensure that learners experience success early in any program to give

them the feeling that they are indeed able to learn. It is also important to ensure that adult learners understand the expectations of instructors and programs, and to know the consequences of not meeting the expectations. However, instructors need to be sensitive to the insecurities and personal doubts which are often the remnants of past experiences students have associated with learning. Expectations for performance are only necessary when students persevere, so it is necessary to establish a 'safe' atmosphere to assist students through the first stressful stages of a program.

The need to seek out and to participate in programs to improve reading and writing skills of individuals is often the result of some personal crisis. Kreitlow, Glustrom and Martin (1980) make reference to the element of crisis in the participation decisions of adults, noting that the students in this situation have a high level of reliance on family and friends outside the learning experience. They suggest that institutions and programs could utilize these individuals as para-professionals or volunteers, especially for those needing the most support, at the lowest levels of basic education.

Despite the support offered by programs and instructors for learners, the need to satisfy basic personal needs may result in a person's inability to persist over the length of time required to become truly literate in the definition of the technological society. However, even if this end goal

has not been reached, the learner may have made significant gains in his or her ability to deal with the print medium. Strengths and achievements are evidenced by all learners and these should be acknowledged and utilized as the basis upon which further learning can take place. Furthermore, because of the long commitment required to reach higher literacy levels, many learners at the lower levels are going to 'stop out' (leave a program for a period of time but later return) of the education process to rally their strength and reassess their options. Programs have to recognize that human needs have to be met before the educational ones can be addressed and allow for the process of recommitment to take place.

Not all problems of persistence in basic literacy programs are going to be solved by addressing the personal variables affecting learners. If educators truly believe that basic education for adults is important, then they need to place greater emphasis on the structures that encourage learners to persist. Long term funding plans for programs are required to create a sense of permanency, so that those learners recognizing the fact that they will need a long time to reach functional literacy or some required grade level, know they will have support to achieve their goals. Furthermore, if policymakers really wish to improve the literacy levels of those without the necessary skills, they must also commit funds to meet the basic needs of learners without imposing unrealistic time limits (for example,

funding for only one year for a learner at a third or fourth grade level.)

Throughout the course of investigation of the questions for this study, it became clear that programs, instructors and funding agencies need to be more flexible and attempt to address the individual needs of learners if they are to make significant advances in the attainment of universal literacy competence. The struggle to become literate is a difficult task for adults and those who wish to accomplish it need to be encouraged and assisted if we hope to achieve a stronger more educated society.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study was designed to ascertain some of the personal variables that affect the decisions that adults make concerning participation and persistence in adult basic education programs. When adults seek to improve their literacy skills, personal variables interact with others outside the control of the individual to influence decisions on persistence. As all of the individuals participating in the study had opted to discontinue participation, their views and opinions reflect only a portion of the adult basic learners in the programs in the institutions contacted. To ascertain a total picture of the adult basic learner, a further study should look at the decision making process and

satisfaction levels of those who persist and achieve the goal of functional literacy (or specific grade level required for entrance into vocational training or post-secondary education).

Also, because of the phenomenon of 'stopping out', a follow-up study of the 20 participants in this research, over time, would be helpful for defining the longitudinal participation patterns of these kinds of learners. Information on the long term involvement of learners would assist program planners in designing more flexible programs to meet the needs of the adults who become involved in literacy educations.

The field of adult literacy education is relatively new and there has been little research into the educational techniques and materials that would be most relevant and beneficial for the attainment of higher level reading and writing skills. Investigation needs to be undertaken to provide educators with this information so that they can equip themselves to plan and offer the most effective programs possible.

A Final Word

The data presented in this study shows that each learner's experiences are unique and that there is a multiplicity of factors affecting the participation and persistance decisions of learners. There are no simple

solutions to providing for the educational needs of people with low reading and writing skills. It is also clear from this study that participation decisions for low literate people are not solely based on educational considerations, but reflect the social realities faced by learners. Educators interested in assisting learners achieve their educational goals must recognise the need for flexibility in programming, in both curriculum content and delivery modes.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW OUTLINE

Name:_____ Date of Interview:

Date of Birth:_____ Place of Birth:

1. Personal History

Age:

Family History (siblings, position in the family):

Previous Home (rural/urban):

Present Family (spouse, children, parents):

Present Home (rural/urban):

Physical Problems (hearing, sight, speech, other):
-when detected:
-treatment:

Illnesses: Long term/frequency -
Injuries from accidents -
Allergies -

What language was spoken at home when you were a child - (what was the first language learned):

Is there anyone else in the family with reading or writing difficulties:

Was much reading done at home when you were young:

2. Educational History

Age of beginning school:

Where:

Grades skipped or repeated:
- Why:

Change of schools : frequency -
what grades -

Highest grade achieved:

School absences: frequency -
usual reason -

Any special difficulties: what -
when noted -

Did anyone ever try to help give you extra help - at school:
- at home:

Feelings about school: what liked -
what disliked -

3. Work/Vocational History

Past Jobs:

Present Employment:

Is reading or writing required on the job:

Job training programs:

Feelings about jobs - work in general:

Occupational goals/desires:

- do you expect to realize them:
- why or why not

4.Methods for Dealing with Reading and Writing Requirements

.1.What do you do when you have to read something (notices, letters, bills):

.2.How do you feel about this:

.3.What changes, if any, would you like to be able to make in this? - Why?:

(supplemental - if discussion goes in this direction)

.4.How would reading your own printed material affect the person who usually does it for you:

.5.Do you do anything in exchange for the reading/writing services:

.6.Have you ever been cheated by someone because you had to have them read something for you:

(if no alternate reader/writer is used)

.7.Do you feel you've missed out on anything important because you couldn't read a notice or letter:

.8.Why would you not have someone read for you:

5.Decision to Participate in Program

.1.Why did you decide to take part in a literacy course:

.2.How did you find out about the program:

.3.Did something in your life change to trigger the decision:

.4.Was it a difficult decision:
- why or why not:

.5.How did you feel when you had actually made the decision?

.6.Did you contact the program immediately or did that take a while:

.7.Do you remember how you felt after the initial contact:

.8.What did you think the program could do for you? What long term goals did you have in mind?

.9.What was the initial reaction of the people around you when they heard about your decision to go to school:

.10.Did anyone voice doubt about your ability to do it:
(if yes) How did you feel about that:
Did it make you reconsider your decision:

.11.Did you get any kind of institutional or government support - ie:Training allowance, daycare:

6.<u>The Program</u>

.1.What were your first impressions of the program once you started attending class:

.2.Did these change at all over time:

.3.How did you feel being back in a school situation:
Was it different than when you were a kid? How:

.4.Did you expect anything different than what you found:
Did this please or displease you:

.5.What kinds of changes took place in your life when you started classes:

.6.Did your family have to make changes in their lives or schedules:
How did they feel about this:
Were they involved in discussions of changes that would have to be made proir to you attenting class:

.7.How did your children feel about you being at school:
Your spouse/mate:
Friends:

7.Discontinuing Studies

.1.Why did you decide to leave:

(if personal goals met)

.2.Did your goals change once classes started:
If so, why:

.3.How have your new skills helped you since the program:

.4.How has this affected those people around you:

.5.Has it made you feel any differently about yourself:

(if not the above case)

.6.Did something go wrong:
At home:
At school:

.7.Was the decision to leave the program easy or difficult:
Why:

.8.Would you go back if the conditions were right:
What would that take:

.9.Did you feel the program was what you expected:

.10.Do you think that the program tried to treat your individual difficulties:

.11.How did others feel about you not completing the program:
Did this matter to you:

.12.Is there anything that would have helped you to stay on:

.13.Compared to before you went to class, have there been any changes in your life:
Do you use the same methods to cope with reading and writing tasks as you did before the course:

.14.Do you think the coures did you any good:

8.General Recommondations and Comments

.1.Did the program help you with your particular problems?
In what way:

.2.Is there any kind of service that would have helped you while you were going to school:

.3.What would you like to see changed in the program:
Why:

.4.If you could make suggestions to someone who was setting up a program, is there anything that you would like to point out or suggest to help students stay in courses:

.5.Are there any other comments you would like to make: